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# Muslim Tatar Women's Piety Stories: A Quest for Personal and Social Transformation In Tatarstan (Russia)

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MUSLIM TATAR WOMEN'S PIETY STORIES:  
A QUEST FOR PERSONAL AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN TATARSTAN  
(RUSSIA)

A Dissertation Presented

by

LILIYA V. KARIMOVA

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
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Department of Communication



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## DEDICATION

Авыр заманнарда да иман нурын, кешелеклелеген, ихтыяр көчен  
югалтмыйча, башкаларга туры юлны яктыртып яшәгән кадерле әниәмә һәм барлык  
фидакаръ татар хатын-кызларына багышлыйм.

Avır zamannarda da iman nurın, kesheleklelegen, ikhtıiar köchen iugaltmıycha,  
bashkalarga turı iulnı iaktirıp iashägän kaderle äniemä häm barklyk fidakar' tatar  
khatin-kızlarına bagışliym.

To my mother and other Tatar women whose faith, kindness, and courage persevered  
through difficult times, lighting a path for others.

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ABSTRACT

MUSLIM TATAR WOMEN'S PIETY STORIES:  
A QUEST FOR PERSONAL AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN TATARSTAN  
(RUSSIA)

SEPTEMBER 2013

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This dissertation introduces and analyzes *piety stories*, the stories that Muslim Tatar women in Tatarstan, Russia, share about their paths to becoming observant Muslims. It examines the ways women use these stories to create and represent moral worlds that diverge from those of the mostly secular, historically Christian, society that surrounds them. This study is based on ethnographic research and recordings of stories in Tatarstan's capital city of Kazan and its suburbs over a total period of thirteen months (from 2006 through 2010).

While outsiders often see Islam as oppressing women, these women experience Muslim piety as a source of agency and a resource for personal and social transformation in post-Soviet Russia. Piety stories allow Muslim Tatar women to (re)experience their commitment to Islam at the discursive level and to invite others to step onto a path to Muslim piety, thus serving as a form of *da'wah*, a Muslim's moral duty to invite others to

Islam. Through these stories, women perform identities, negotiate group memberships, and contribute to building both local and global Muslim communities.

Piety stories serve as a window onto the personal politics of the post-Soviet Muslim revival. Older women, for example, use stories to create coherent narratives of their piety, despite their relative lack of religious practice during the state-endorsed atheism of the Soviet period. Expressions of gender are also intertwined with this political and economic history. Both Soviet policies and the immediate post-Soviet economic collapse required women to work outside the home in addition to caring for their families, and many Muslim Tatar women find the clear delineation of traditional gender roles and rights in Islam liberating. In global and local contexts where Muslim piety is often conflated with political Islam and terrorism, women use piety stories to deal with stereotypical perceptions of Muslims by showing their religious identities and the forms of Islam they practice to be moral. Ultimately, practicing Muslim Tatar women use piety stories as one way—a discursive one—to challenge, re-produce, or legitimize their understanding of Islam and what it means to be a practicing Muslim Tatar woman in Russia today.

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*“Without faith, a person sinks to the bottom,”*

*Guzel, a 29-year-old medrese<sup>1</sup> student*

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is about “piety stories,” the stories that practicing Muslim Tatar women in Tatarstan, Russia, tell about their paths to Muslim piety. These women, many of whom lived most of their lives as Soviet citizens, see Islam and a Muslim life style as a way to personal and social transformation. The communicative practice of sharing piety stories provides one way—a discursive one—for both the story teller and the audience to experience this transformation first-hand. As such, these stories are an inseparable part of the women’s *iman* [Tat. ‘faith’], identity, the local Muslim discursive community, and the Tatars religious revival.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this dissertation is to understand what practicing Muslim Tatar women, as social actors, do when they tell or hear a piety story and what rhetorical and social effects story-sharing has on both the narrator and the audience. Drawing on research on conversion narratives (Stromberg, 1993) and life stories (Linde, 1993) and assuming a performative approach to language (Austin, 1961, 1962), I argue that through sharing piety stories, women perform their identities and negotiate group memberships.

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<sup>1</sup> This spelling of the originally Arabic word *madrasah* reflects the Russian pronunciation of the word. Unless indicated otherwise in the dissertation, for ease of comprehension, I use this particular transliteration of the originally Arabic word. This style of transliteration is not inappropriate because a fair number of *medrese* students that I met during fieldwork, especially the younger generation, regularly use the Russian version of the word. Because both Russian and Tatar have many Arabic borrowings, and the same Arabic word may be pronounced slightly differently in Russian than in Tatar, I represent these differences in pronunciation (and ultimately, language use) through different spellings, or transliterations. For example, if an interviewee used the word *madrasah* in Tatar, I transliterated it accordingly: *mādrāsā*.

<sup>2</sup> In my treatment of the Tatars’ religious revival, I draw on Hirschkind’s (2006) conceptualization of the Islamic Revival, based on Egypt’s example, as “not a given socio-ideological formation but a contingent and shifting constellation of ideas, practices and associational forms” (p. 207). I elaborate on the Tatar Muslim revival in chapter 2.

More importantly, piety stories provide a discursive way for the speaker to practice being a Muslim in the very moment of interaction, and for the audience, a blueprint for becoming one. Ultimately, drawing on the understandings of agency as (a) an ability to make choices and impact the environment (Giddens, 1984) and (b) an ability to submit to prescribed norms of behavior (Mahmood, 2005), I demonstrate that piety stories create a communicative and communal space where women strategically construct and exercise their agency.

Post-Soviet socio-economic upheaval led Tatar women to make new sense of the world: their sense of self, their beliefs and values, and their understanding of what it means to be a woman in post-Soviet Russia. The Tatar ethnic and religious revival further sharpened Tatars' sense of identity, putting the role of Islam in the center of Tatars' debates on their identity and future. In this context, Muslim Tatar women agentively use piety stories to negotiate their identities, gain a group membership, re-affirm their commitment to Islam, and provide the audience with a sample path to Muslim piety, which they regard as a means to personal and social transformation.

More specifically, older Tatar women who experienced adulthood during the Soviet era and became practicing Muslims later in life, strategically craft continuity and coherence in their stories as a way to achieve moral standing and authority among those who might question their commitment to piety, such as the younger generation of Muslim Tatar women. In another instance, women question the benefits of gender equality that were once promoted by the Soviet government and are now supported by advocates of women's rights whose understanding of freedom as a universal individual right is based on a progressivist and liberal political agenda (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood, 2005).

Tatar Muslim women provide their own interpretations of what it means to be a (Muslim) woman (or man) in post-Soviet Russia where the government's neo-familial policies compete with the double-burden that many women continue to carry as main breadwinners and caregivers. Finally, as the Russian government struggles to define and institute an official form of Islam in an effort to curb Russian Muslims' interest in exploring religious traditions that are new to them, Tatars debate whether and what kind of Islam should define their identity. Women use piety stories to counter negative stereotypes formed on the basis of a Muslim's sources of religious knowledge (such as a website, for example) and his or her physical practices (such as the daily prayers, or a long beard, for example). In the process, Muslim Tatar women normalize and legitimize their own religious identities and practices which otherwise may be interpreted as foreign to Tatars' religious tradition and thus their future. In doing so, they actively construct and exercise their agency at the discursive level.

This study is based on ethnographic research that I conducted in the Tatarstan capital city of Kazan and some of its suburbs over a total period of thirteen months (June-July 2006; August-September 2008; August 2009-April 2010). The main theoretical framework for this dissertation is a study of (conversion) narratives, which approaches discourse as an observable performance (Goffman, 1981) and focuses on conversion narrative itself, as opposed to an actual conversion event that took place in the past and is now being shared (Stromberg, 1993). Such an approach still allows for an exploration of the significance behind religious experience because "in order to tell the stories of their conversions, believers must talk about aspects of their experience that have profound meanings for them" (Stromberg, 1993, p. 15).

While data for this study consist of individual women's discourses and experience, they are grounded in ethnographic observations and larger socio-cultural realities. My inquiry into the local communicative practices shared by practicing Muslim Tatar women was conducted with the ultimate goal of understanding some of the ways these women make sense of themselves, the world they live in, and their positions in it. In some respect, then, this study is an attempt to contribute to the body of knowledge, grounded in local socio-historical milieu, that is generated in response to Abu-Lughod's (2002) call to abandon the *apriori* assumptions that Muslim women need saving from oppressive structures that are inherent in Islam. It is my hope that my analysis of piety stories will provide insight into the broader social and historical forces that these stories are part of such as the Tatars' post-Soviet ethnic and religious revival.

### **Origin of this Study**

Growing up during the last decade of the Soviet Union, I witnessed Islam—as I knew it—take an unexpected turn, embodied in my mother's religious transformation. My earliest experience of Islam—at the age of four—was my mother's quiet recitation of a short prayer in Arabic every night before bedtime. I could not understand the meaning of it at the time, but I remember the way it sounded: “*Ahuzu billyahi mina shaitan irrazim bismillyah irrahman irrahim. . .*”<sup>3</sup> I remember asking my mother what the words meant during her occasional attempts to teach them to my sister and me. She would say that they helped to keep *cherti* [Ru. ‘demons’] away at night. I was a four-year-old, terrified of darkness and a terrible sleeper, and my mother's simple explanation made perfect

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<sup>3</sup> This transcription reflects the way my mother recited the prayer, as I remember it.

sense. My mother also put an old Qur'an under my pillow, wrapped in a white cotton scarf. Those things made me feel secure and sleep better.

On occasion—when someone in our family was sick or when something important was to take place—my mother would visit an old Tatar couple that happened to be our neighbors in a Soviet style apartment building. She referred to them as Shamil *babay* [Tat. ‘grandfather; old man’] and Saniya *apa* [Tat. ‘aunt’]. I often accompanied her. The couple was in their seventies, and spoke only Tatar during our visits. After reciting some Qur’anic verses in Arabic, Saniya *apa* would say a prayer in Tatar with her hands in the air, palms put together as if trying to catch some rain drops. At the end of the prayer, she would touch her face with her hands, as if washing her face with water. My mother and I would repeat the movements, and everyone would say “Amin” at the end.

I enjoyed our visits to the old couple because they always gave me treats, like caramelized candy. As someone who was growing up without grandparents or elderly relatives around, I was also filled with curiosity about the couple—I did not know anyone else who was *that* old and gentle. When I was about five, we moved to a different apartment, and our visits to the old couple became rare. Our last visit to Saniya *apa* took place when I was about nine. Shamil *babay* was gone by then. Saniya *apa* passed away shortly thereafter. Almost twenty years later, in the course of my fieldwork, I learned that Shamil *babay* was a *mullah* [Tat. ‘Muslim clergy’] in one of Kazan’s mosques, and was sent to prison by the Soviet authorities. I also learned that he was the one who performed *isem kushu*, a Tatar Muslim name-giving ceremony, when I was born.

After Shamil *babay* and Saniya *apa* passed away, my mother befriended a Tatar family who also happened to be our neighbors. In the mid nineteen-eighties, at the very

beginning of *Perestroika*, Gorbachev's political reforms, they were the only observant Muslim family that we knew of in our small industrial town just west of Kazan. The husband's father, an elderly Tatar man whom I'll call Khasan *babay*, had the same peace and gentleness about him as Shamil *babay* and Saniya *apa*. A former coal miner, he became observant<sup>4</sup> upon retirement, and my mother visited him for the same purposes she used to visit the other couple. I often came with her. When Khasan *babay* became seriously ill, my mother would bring him her homemade food. He would encourage her to start performing *namaz*, the Muslim five daily ritual prayers. She originally began reciting only the morning prayer, performing it before leaving for work early in the mornings. She was in her early fifties and was several years short of reaching official retirement age of fifty-five. These were the difficult times of the 1990s Yeltsin<sup>5</sup> era reforms with economic shock therapy, price liberalization, and privatization, which left many ordinary citizens unemployed and with no means for survival. To help support family when both her and my father's wages were held back for several months, my mother did not retire, but changed jobs and continued working until she was forced to retire at the age of sixty. It was then that she began performing all five daily prayers.

When I returned home after having been away in the U.S. for three years for graduate school, I learned that my mother had begun studying at a local *medrese*, but left it shortly after due to time constraints and family obligations. She continued with her five daily prayers. Upon one of my visits home four years later, my mother greeted me with a headscarf tied in the back of her neck, which I had only previously seen her wearing

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<sup>4</sup> Based on my memory, his religious observation was marked by the performance of the five daily prayers, attending Friday mosque sermons, and a pilgrimage to Mecca (a rare opportunity at the time).

<sup>5</sup> Boris Yeltsin was Mikhail Gorbachev's successor and the first president of the Russian Federation (following the collapse of the Soviet Union).

during private religious gatherings in honor of someone's death, birth, or marriage. She announced that she had re-entered the *medrese* and was determined to finish it that time. From calf-length skirts typical for the Soviet generation women of her age, she had switched to full-length skirts and long-sleeve tops to dress in accordance with what she was taught to be the proper way for a Muslim woman to dress. On hot summer days, however, she still wore short-sleeve tops, coupled with long skirts and a headscarf, while pointing out that the short-sleeved tops were not the proper way to dress for a Muslim woman, particularly of her age. I also discovered that, having become convinced that alcohol is *haram* [Ar. 'forbidden'] in Islam, my mother no longer served guests any alcohol and refused to attend celebrations if alcohol was being served. Instead, she began attending and hosting *Qur'an ashlar* [Tat. 'Religious gatherings with the purpose of reciting the Qur'an, usually accompanied by meal'] several times a year, but particularly during important Muslim holidays such as *Uraza bäyräm* [Tat. 'the celebration of Ramadan']<sup>6</sup> or *Korban bäyräm* [Tat. 'the celebration of Qurban'].<sup>7</sup>

By my next visit home from the U.S., my mother had graduated from the *medrese*. Her growing piety was marked for me by further changes in her wardrobe and diet. She no longer wore short-sleeve blouses outside the home, even on hot summer days. She also no longer consumed any meat if she was not sure that it was *halal* [Tat/Ar. 'Islamically permissible'], meaning that the animal was slaughtered in accordance with the requirements of Muslim law. She stopped shaking hands with men who were not her kin and who, in her judgment, would be able to understand her conviction that only a woman's husband or a close male kin had the right to touch her. Out of politeness, she

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<sup>6</sup> Also known as *Eid-ul-Fitr* (Ar.), is a Muslim holiday that marks the end of the Muslim holy month of *Ramadan* [Ar.] during which Muhammad received the revelation to the Qur'an.

<sup>7</sup> Also known as *Eid-ul-Adha* (Ar.), is a Muslim holiday of the sacrifice that celebrates Abraham's obedience to God.

occasionally shook hands with men who, according to her, were not aware of or would not easily understand the religious tradition she followed.

My mother's religious transformation affected her life in very tangible ways. They were marked by the changes in her social circle, her diet and wardrobe, and the ways she organized her daily schedule (around prayer times) and spent her free time (by practicing *tajwid* [Ar. 'Rules of Qur'anic recitation']). But those changes did not end with her. They affected the family and friends in multiple, sometimes unexpected, ways, from their ongoing attempts to understand her piety or their own relative lack of it, to their beginning the five daily prayers or following Muslim dietary laws, or to following in her footsteps by entering the *medrese*. My mother never talked to me about her religious transformation, perhaps assuming there was nothing to say because I was witnessing it. But on a number of occasions, I overheard others ask her about her newfound Muslim piety, and heard her tell a story in response.

### **Defining and Analyzing Piety Stories**

To refer to Muslim Tatar women's narratives about their paths to Muslim piety, I have coined the term "piety story." Previous research on personal narratives associated with religious experience uses such terms as "conversion narrative" (Griffin, 1990), "conversion story" (Stromberg, 1993), or "spiritual journey" (Molina-Markham, 2012). These terms focus not only on conversion understood as a change from one system of belief to another, but also as an ongoing change in one's religious commitment within the same normative religious system, which is also the case with practicing Muslim Tatars. Additionally, following Stromberg's definition of conversion stories (1993, p. 32), I



consider Muslim Tatar women's narratives about striving to maintain their piety as an inseparable part of their piety stories. Even though these narratives may be tied to a specific point in time—a specific point of “conversion,” they often go beyond the original event, underlining the ongoing nature of one's religious commitment.

While I build on the above-mentioned research on conversion narrative, I chose to call Muslim Tatar women's narratives “piety stories” because I believe that the existing terminology does not accommodate for the normative understanding of Muslim piety central to my analysis. To illuminate how Muslim piety differs from Christian understandings of faith, which are at the center of conversion narratives mentioned above, I use Mahmood's (2005) explanation of Muslim piety. Mahmood (2005) stressed that normative Muslim piety is grounded in physical (bodily) manifestations that are prescribed in the Qur'an and *Sunnah* [Ar. ‘normative conduct based on the Prophet Muhammad's example’] and are binding on every able Muslim. The most basic daily bodily practices are, for example, the five daily prayers, observance of modest clothing, and dietary requirements. One's piety—commitment to God—is thus determined by and enacted through one's ability to submit to these numerous requirements on a daily basis, which becomes an ongoing quest. To simplify, one's *spiritual* state is directly tied to one's ability to perform the normative *physical* rituals. Furthermore, unless one was socialized into these rituals since early childhood, one has to gradually learn to perform them and do so in a proper manner.

This is certainly the case for most Muslim Tatar women at the center of this dissertation, who turned to Muslim piety—became observant Muslims—later in life, due to the Soviet state's policy of atheism. I refer to these women throughout the dissertation

as observant, practicing, or pious, interchangeably.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, one's familiarity with and acknowledgement of the rituals and does not constitute piety—it is one's ability to enact them on a daily basis that does. Even if a Muslim Tatar woman underwent a conversion experience similar to that of an Evangelical Christian, she has to strive to achieve Muslim piety on a daily basis and in very specifically prescribed ways. Moreover, because the Qur'an and *Sunnah* regulate every aspect of life, physical manifestations of Muslim piety (such as the headscarf, for example) become public and observable by others (Muslims and non-Muslims alike). Therefore, some physical manifestations of a Muslim woman's piety (such as her dress, for example) are present in the moment of interaction and are not only heard about, but also directly observable by others. Finally, I use the analytical term "piety story" as opposed to "piety narrative" to emphasize the "extended reportability" (Linde, 1993, p. 22) of these narratives—their repeated sharing overtime. To sum up, what I term a "piety story" in this dissertation refers to all narratives an individual woman tells about her path to Muslim piety.

In my analysis of the piety stories, I draw on Stromberg's (1993) notion of identity as a style of doing things. Such conceptualization of identity places the focus of my analysis on the style of the women's narratives. As Stromberg (1993) suggests, such an approach calls for attention to the linguistic practices—interplay of ideas, narrative viewpoint, speech units—that the narrators use to enact personal experience in terms of a "canonical language" (p. 34).<sup>9</sup> I also draw on Linde's (1993) approach to analyzing life stories, which focuses on linking the structure of narrative to ways the narrator uses the

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<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that Muslim women who are not observant are not pious (in the sense of being devout or faithful), but to emphasize, drawing on Mahmood (2005), the *practice* of Muslim piety.

<sup>9</sup> By "canonical language" Stromberg (1993) refers to "a set of symbols concerned with something enduring and beyond everyday reality" (p. 3), not in the strictly Christian sense as in "biblical canon." I follow Stromberg's usage in my dissertation.

story, thereby allowing to look at a narrative as a social practice. Such an analysis involves examining multiple levels of linguistic units, “beginning with the smallest linguistic level of morphological structure, continuing through the structures at the level of the discourse unit, and culminating at the cultural and historical level of the coherence system” (Linde, 1993, p. 224). Overarching assumptions underlying this work are (a) that language embodies the social and ideological and is, therefore, always indexical and never neutral; and (b) that interlocutors are never isolated and their speech acts constantly compete for meaning (Duranti, 1994). With that in mind and following Bakhtin’s (1981) observation that “form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon” (p. 259), I also analyze what is being said, in addition to how it is being said. Finally, emphasizing the situational nature of communicative practices and their role in expressing and constituting identities (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; Bailey 2000a, 2000b), I locate these piety stories within the contexts where they take place, examining the situational detail and, when appropriate, the role of the researcher.

### **Understanding Muslim Piety and (non-liberal) Agency**

In my dissertation, I draw on Giddens’ (1984) understanding of agency as people’s “capability of doing . . . things” because agency “concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in a sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of contact, have acted differently” (p. 9). Such a definition (a) views agency as an individual ability to make choices and impact the environment (the structure), (b) underscores that structure and agency, the macro (history) and the micro (subjectivity) are necessarily and continuously dependent; and (c) that structure is both enabling and

limiting. In my analyses, I modify Giddens' (1984) definition of agency by answering Ortner's (1984) call to go beyond the concept of agency as a mere "en-actment of the rules and roles of the system" (p. 159) and to understand the workings of agency at the level of an individual, through an interaction. As I illustrate throughout this dissertation, practicing Muslim Tatar women use piety stories strategically and creatively to negotiate and legitimize their identities, gain group membership, re-enact their commitment to Islam, and invite the listeners to step onto the road to piety that they see as a venue for personal and social transformation. The women's ability to utilize piety stories as communicative resources for performing those social actions constitutes multiple instances of agency.

Ortner's (2006) emphasis on understanding how agency works at the micro/local level is based on the assumption that "agency is not some natural or ordinary will: it takes shape as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of subjectivity—of (culturally constituted) feelings, thoughts, and meanings" (p. 110). Such an approach allows for culturally specific forms of agency, which sometimes can be easily overlooked and misinterpreted. In the case of practicing Muslim Tatar women who are the subjects of this dissertation, it is the nonliberal understanding of agency, tied to the notion of Muslim piety, which informs my analyses and discussions in this dissertation.

The nonliberal understanding of agency challenges the poststructuralist feminist assumption that agency must be understood only as an ability to resist or subvert the existing norms and authority (Mahmood, 2005). For Muslim women, this alternative understanding of agency is directly tied to the concept of Muslim piety. As suggested above, Muslim piety is grounded in the minutiae of physical daily rituals so much so that

they are both an *outcome* and a *source* of faith (Mahmood, 2005). Such an understanding of piety requires more than having faith that one “carries in his or her heart”: it requires the correct performance of daily rituals prescribed in the Qur’an and *Sunnah*.

Furthermore, such a concept of piety provides a basis for an alternative notion of agency that requires a departure from the poststructuralist feminist understanding of agency exclusively as one’s ability to undermine, subvert, and resist existing norms and authority. Many contexts demand an alternative understanding of agency as one’s ongoing effort and ability to submit one’s body and mind to those norms and authority.

As I worked on this project and shared parts of it with American academic and non-academic audiences, a frequent initial reaction to it was a sense of surprise over what was perceived as the women’s combination of religiosity, as marked by practice, and relative absence of faith. This was typically followed by a sense of pity for the Tatar Muslim women who were “brainwashed” to believe that submission can be a source of faith and will earn a reward from God. I myself was guilty of applying my own liberal expectations to the women I thought I knew and understood well. Having studied Muslim communities in the U.S. during graduate school, I was particularly impressed by the activism of the younger generation of Muslim Americans who, I thought, considered themselves full members of the wider American society and actively participated in it. This meant that they had access to higher education *and* took advantage of it; they actively participated in campus life and were active members of their local communities, and upon graduation, they built careers. Most importantly, they were often interested in the issues of social justice, which meant that they cared and took steps to help people

who were not family and friends, regardless of their religious affiliation.<sup>10</sup> This was regardless of the fact whether or not women wore scarves, observed the prayers and other rituals. In other words, their “Muslimness” did not stand in the way of their empowerment and activity in the wider (non-Muslim) society.

These observations resulted in my having certain expectations, before I began my fieldwork, of observant Tatar Muslim women. The legacy of the Soviet experience, which promoted women’s emancipation and gender equality by making women work outside the home, in combination with post-Soviet freedoms, led me to expect Tatar Muslim women to be as active outside of their homes as inside of them. However, I quickly found myself disappointed when, during our initial encounters, younger women (especially) did not talk about any such activities and seemed to have no desire for what I thought of as personal or social transformation. Instead of answering my questions, these women “interrogated” me about my own, possibly suspect religiosity<sup>11</sup> and never failed to correct poorly executed religious practices that I might perform. Like Mahmood (2005, p. 37), who studied the mosque movement and politics of piety among women in Egypt, I initially felt “repugnance” in these encounters.

Mahmood (2005) explains this mismatch as a function of researchers’ unconsciously imposing a liberal/progressivist feminist framework on pious Muslim women rather than as a function of shortcomings in the agency of pious women. She argues that even such feminist anthropologists as Abu-Lughod (1986), while extending

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<sup>10</sup> I formed this impression particularly after learning about “Project Downtown,” which was carried out by Muslim Student Associations throughout many U.S. campuses. The immediate purpose of the project was to provide free food to the needy, which was often financed by students themselves and carried out by them. For more information about this project, go <http://projectdowntown.org/>

<sup>11</sup> As chapter 4 on piety stories will illustrate, women often wanted to know my “story,” and while such role reversal took place fairly often, it was not always hostile. With time, I learned how to navigate through certain questions and my religious knowledge and practices also became more advanced to the point of not being questioned. During her fieldwork among Uzbek women, Peshkova (2006) observed a similar role reversal, which she calls a methodological “role inverse” (p. 42).

the feminist critique to contexts that were not structured by liberalism with its emphasis on individual freedom (in particular in her study of Bedouin women's poetry as a socially legitimate practice of women's resistance to male domination), still operated within the underlying assumptions of the dominant feminist paradigm. Mahmood (2005) finds that Western feminists recognize only certain types of subjects and agency, but treat their understandings as universal, thus transforming their feminism from an academic, analytical perspective to a "*politically prescriptive project*" (p. 10). This Western feminist perspective treats (a) resistance/subversion as the only agentive response to domination and (b) freedom as individual (personal) autonomy. These assumptions have implications for how agency is (mis)understood and approached, as Mahmood (2005) elaborates:

if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes "change" and the means by which it is effected), then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist the norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms. (p. 15)

Mahmood (2005) illustrates how Muslim women achieve agency not by subverting the highly prescriptive religious norms, but by submitting to them. Drawing on Foucault's work on ethical formations, she explains the importance of "embodied ethics": the physical manifestations of piety in Islam such as the five daily prayers, the veil, and the diet, but also obedience to one's pious spouse. Finally, Mahmood underscores that her emphasis on agency as ethical self-formation is not apolitical because, as theories of the public sphere acknowledge, regulation of the daily bodily

practices is key to “shaping the civic and public sensibilities essential to the consolidation of a secular-liberal polity” (p. 74) such as the Egyptian state.

While Mahmood’s ethnographic study was conducted in Egypt, it has important theoretical implications for other regions undergoing Muslim revival. This is particularly relevant with regards to the issues concerning normative practices associated with Muslim gender roles. As Peshkova (2013), observes in her explorations of non-liberal forms of freedom and desire among Uzbek Muslim women, most feminist scholarship on Muslim women in Central Asia, for example, is still conducted within the overriding feminist paradigm of domination and resistance. This dissertation is the first study to explore this alternative form of agency among Muslim women in Russia. As I will illustrate throughout the dissertation, Mahmood’s (2005) argument of embodied piety as a basis for agency that can effect personal and social transformation helps make sense of these women’s piety stories and shows that “what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view” (p. 15) is an historically and culturally specific form of agency.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

**Chapter 2** provides historical background and social context relevant for this study, tracing Tatars’ position as an ethnic (Tatar) and religious (Muslim) minority within imperial, Soviet, and present-day Russia. I provide a brief historical overview of popular Tatar discourses on gender and women’s issues, focusing on perceptions of the role of women, and suggest how those discussions may have affected the Tatar women’s social roles. Finally, I describe the Tatars’ recent post-Soviet ethno-religious revival and a



continuum of contemporary Muslim Tatar forms of piety, including my own positioning(s) along it.

In **Chapter 3**, I present methodology for data collection and analysis that I employed for this project. I discuss the rationale for an in-depth ethnographic study and my focus on an individual woman's experience and narrative as a window into the larger social reality. I describe the data collection and selection process and the roles my identity as both a Tatar "native" and U.S.-based and U.S.-educated researcher played in the data collection process. I follow with a discussion of discourse analysis and "life story" as a key unit of analysis. I address concerns associated with language use, interpreting and writing up the data. Finally, I explain how my simultaneous positioning as a researcher and a native impacted my social and moral standing in relation to this project.

In **Chapter 4**, I explore religious contexts in which piety stories are usually told, drawing on four piety stories-sharing experiences. I analyze the culturally shared premises and social meanings behind the communicative practice of sharing paths to Muslim piety. I argue that soliciting and sharing stories about one's path to Muslim piety is a communicative way of performing identity and re-affirming one's commitment to Muslim piety. I further demonstrate how story telling contributes to community building if the storyteller succeeds in orienting herself toward her audience (through stance-taking) and the audience shares in the religious commitment. Finally, I argue that, in the moment of interaction, the stories provide a discursive way for the speaker to practice being a Muslim and for the audience, a blueprint for becoming one. By doing so, these piety stories serve as a source of agency for both personal and social transformation.

In **Chapter 5**, I explain how the Soviet era's atheism policy and the post-Soviet religious revival may have contributed to generational differences in the ways practicing Muslim women of the Soviet and post-Soviet generations understand Muslim piety. In particular, I suggest that, in the context of the recent Muslim revival, the older generation's non-observance of Islam earlier in life may raise questions about the quality of the older women's faith and their moral standing, particularly from the younger generation of practicing Muslims. Using piety stories of two older Tatar women from different walks of life and with varying degrees of piety, I demonstrate how the Soviet-era Muslim women strategically create continuity and coherence in their commitment to Muslim piety even when such piety was not observed on the physical level for the bulk of their lives, during the Soviet era. I conclude that the older Muslim women discursively construct continuity and coherence in their beliefs as a way to create moral character and achieve moral authority vis-à-vis those who may be skeptical about their religious commitment, such as the younger generation of Muslim women.

**Chapter 6** explores a function of piety stories, *dagvat* [Ru. 'invitation/call to Islam'], through which the speaker appeals to the listener to join the speaker in Islam. As the audience for many piety stories and as a Muslim who was perceived to be relatively less pious, I was regularly exposed to *dagvat*. I begin with a brief overview of the Muslim notion of *da'wah* [Ar. 'invitation/call to Islam'] and show how an act of engaging into *da'wah* represents a moral act, binding on all members of the *Ummah*, the Muslim global community. Providing specific examples, I then explain and illustrate how the notion of *da'wah* is used and understood by the Tatars in their contexts today. Finally, drawing on piety stories of two Muslim Tatar women (and data excerpts used in previous chapters), I

demonstrate how piety stories may serve as an indirect form of *da'wah*, the ultimate purpose of which is to effect a personal and social change.

In the two remaining data-based chapters, I shift the focus of my analysis from examining culturally specific communicative features and functions of piety stories to investigating what these stories—and their narrators—can tell us about the sociocultural reality of which they are part. In **Chapter 7**, through narratives I examine Muslim Tatar women's perceptions of gender roles and norms in the context of the post-Soviet Muslim revival. In my analysis, I respond to Abu-Lughod's (2002) call for abandoning *apriori* criticisms of Islam as an inherently oppressive force towards women<sup>12</sup> and locate the narratives within the local socio-historical milieu. I argue that the Muslim Tatar women's understanding of gender roles and norms must be analyzed against the backdrop of the Tatar historical legacy, influenced by Islam; Soviet gender legacy and post-Soviet transitions; and current government's neofamilial rhetoric, reflected in present-day popular views on gender. I then present an attitude toward gender that is popular in Russia in order to illustrate that strict division of gender roles and patriarchy are not out of the norm and often endorsed by many Russian citizens, whether Christian, Muslim, or secular. I also explain how the Russian government's pronatalist policies—in light of Russia's demographic crisis—contribute to such perceptions of gender roles. I further provide an overview of the Tatar sociohistorical legacy, informed by Islam, that positions Muslim Tatar women's ideas about gender within the local context. By analyzing excerpts from the “Women in Islam” class discussions at a local *medrese*, I demonstrate that the students, young practicing Muslim Tatar women, don't passively learn gender

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<sup>12</sup> Such criticisms are often produced by those advocates of women's rights whose understanding of freedom as a universal individual right is based on progressive and liberal political agenda (Abu-Lughod 2002; Mahmood 2005).

roles and norms that are associated with the Muslim norm, but also challenge them, asserting agency. Finally, I analyze a piety story of a practicing Muslim Tatar woman who compared her roles as a woman during the Soviet era, the post-Soviet transitions, and after becoming a practicing Muslim woman. Her narrative illustrates that Muslim Tatar women find a clear delineation of gender roles and rights in Islam liberating and use it as a source of agency.

In **Chapter 8** I explore Tatars' search for and negotiation of an identity in light of the post-Soviet ethnic and Muslim revival. Based on women's narratives and my ethnographic observations, I discuss two socio-cultural trends at the heart of Tatars' search for identity. One suggests that Tatars' interest in revitalizing their language and building a sovereign nation is also accompanied by a growing interest in Islam, which is no longer treated as a marker of ethnic identity, but a powerful force in its own right. Drawing on an older Muslim Tatar woman's story, I further illustrate the generational difference in the way Tatars perceive identity. Unlike the younger generation of Tatars, the older generation considers the ethnic element of Tatar identity, exemplified in the Tatar language, an important feature of Tatars' identity and future.

The other trend suggests that Tatars debate to what extent and what type of Islam should be part of their identity and future. These debates are happening in the context of post-Soviet religious revival in Russia and Tatarstan and the Russian government's attempts to control the religious space by instituting an official form of Islam and defining what type of Muslim it deems "good."<sup>13</sup> In these public and private debates, a Muslim's sources of religious knowledge (such as a website, a book, or a religious

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<sup>13</sup> I draw on Mamdani's (2004) discussion of "good Muslim"/"bad Muslim," which is presented in more detail in the next chapter.

teacher) and physical rituals (such as the style of one's dress or the five daily prayers) are often considered reliable markers of his or her religious identity. Using two practicing Muslim Tatar women's piety stories as a basis for analysis, I argue that practicing Muslims are aware of stereotypical perceptions formed on the basis of one's sources of religious knowledge (when, for example, one's Arab religious teacher is associated with conservative Islam) or physical practices (when, for instance, the length of one's beard is taken as a sign that one has peaceful or violent religious convictions). I conclude that the women find communicative strategies to deal with such perceptions and use piety stories to negotiate and legitimize their religious identities and the forms of Islam they practice, thereby exerting a sense of agency.

In the final chapter, **Chapter 9**, I first outline research questions and goals at the heart of this dissertation, and explain my methodological choices of ethnography and discourse analysis, and my theoretical focus on agency. I then describe how my own journey, as a researcher but also a human being, contributed to and ultimately framed this dissertation's questions and conclusions. I proceed with a discussion of theoretical implications of this dissertation, particularly stressing the need for "expansion of the normative understanding of critique" (Mahmood 2005, p. 119) in relation to studies that focus on societies that operate under an unfamiliar set of beliefs. Finally, I propose a number of ways this dissertation's research could be capitalized on in order to explore issues that remained outside of the scope of this work.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE TATAR COMMUNITY AND THE MUSLIM REVIVAL**

The piety stories that I analyze in this dissertation take place in a particular historical moment in a particular ethnic and religious context. This historical legacy contributes to and is reflected in the piety stories, and is, therefore, an inseparable part of my analysis and discussion. In this chapter, I provide historical background on the ethnic Tatar community, the post-Soviet Muslim revival, and the role of women in Tatar society today.

#### **Tatars Today**

The Volga Tatars (Tatars hereafter) are Russia's largest ethnic minority and a dominant ethnic group (titular nation) of the Republic of Tatarstan. Tatarstan is located at the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers, about 600 miles east of Moscow and west of the Ural mountains. This location places Tatarstan at the heart of central Russia, which is considered the European part of Russia (versus Russia's East and the Far East, which are to the east of the Urals). Tatarstan's territory measures 26,000 square miles (68,000 square kilometers), which is the size of Ireland (Kondrashov, 2000, p. ix). The republic has a political status of a subject of Russian Federation. This means that, unlike some Central Asian republics that had been part of the Soviet Union but obtained independence from Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tatarstan is not an independent state.

According to the 2010 Russian Census ("Okonchatel'nye itogi," 2010), Tatars constituted 3.87% (or 5,310,649) of the total population of Russia. They make up 52.3%

(or 2,012,571) of Tatarstan's total population of 3,786,488, which breaks down as follows:

Tatars:	2,012,571	(52.3%)
Russians:	1,501,369	(39.7%)
Chuvash:	116,252	(3.1%)
Others:	186,258	(4.9%)

Tatars' sense of identity, including their relationship to Islam, has been shaped by their centuries-long co-existence with other cultures/polities, from the Golden Horde<sup>14</sup> to present-day Russia. While Tatars' ethnogenesis has been at the center of scholarly debate over the past century,<sup>15</sup> a dominant theory shared by present-day scholars traces Tatars' origin to a combination of ancestors: (a) Volga Bulgars, a medieval Turkic people who inhabited the Middle Volga and the lower Kama region, with the capital city of Bolgar<sup>16</sup> since around the eighth century when they began converting to Islam;<sup>17</sup> (b) Kipchak Turks, and (c) Mongol and Turkic tribes.

Indeed, most Tatars today claim that they are descendants of Volga Bulgars who were then successively incorporated into the Golden Horde, converting it to Islam, and then into Kazan khanate. Schamiloglu (1990, 2001), Shnirelman (1996), and Matsuzato (2001) explain that such uninterrupted ancestry with Volga Bulgars at its root is a modern

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<sup>14</sup> A Russian name for the Kipchak khanate, established by Batu Khan in the 13th century as the most north-western part of the Mongol Empire. At its peak, the Golden Horde included most of European Russia ("Golden Horde," 2013).

<sup>15</sup> These theories trace Tatars' origin directly or indirectly to three groups of ancestors: Volga Bulgars (Turkic people), Kipchak-speaking Turks, and Mongol Turks (Wertheim, 2003a, p. 7).

<sup>16</sup> The region's geography corresponds to the present-day Tatarstan.

<sup>17</sup> A first accurate account of Volga Bulgars' conversion to and practice of Islam is attributed to Ibn-Fadlan, the chief secretary of the court representatives which the Baghdad Caliph Al-Muqtadir (908-932) sent to the Volga Bulgars in 922 CE (see, for example, Stewart Gordon's chapter "Caliph and caravan: Ibn Fadlan, 921-922 CE" in *When Asia Was the World*, (Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press, 2009), pp. 21-38. Some evidence indicates that Bulgars were first introduced to Islam as early as seventh century, before they moved to the Middle Volga (Mukhametshin, 2009). For further discussion on the spread of Islam in the Volga River region see Rafik Mukhametshin, *Islam v obshchestvennoi i politicheskoi zhizni tatar i Tatarstana v XX veke* (Kazan, Tatarskoe Knizhnoe Izdatel'stvo, 2005).

ideological construct, created in response to Russia's unfavorable perception of Tatars as direct descendants of the Golden Horde, and thus, enemies. The Russian tsar Ivan the Terrible conquered Kazan in 1552 in a brutal invasion, murdering most of the population and launching a fierce baptizing campaign to convert the remaining population to Orthodox Christianity (Kappeler, 2001). Drawing on Pelenski's (1974) antipodal comparison,<sup>18</sup> Rorlich (1986) suggests: "After the conquest, their [Muscovite elite] policies vis-à-vis the population of the khanate in general, and the Tatars in particular, were shaped by a perception that placed the Tatars and the Russians at antipodes; as can be seen in the following comparison:

<i>Russians:</i>	Believers, religious, Christians, pious, pure, peaceful, and good
<i>Tatars:</i>	Nonbelievers, godless, pagans, impious, unclean, warlike, and bad" (pp. 37-38). <sup>19</sup>

Tatars' identities and religion have thus been long stigmatized by Christian Russians.

Describing the impact of the Russian conquest on Tatars, Rorlich (1986) concludes: "the very existence of its people as a different national, cultural, and religious entity was in danger" (p. 38). Present-day Tatars still feel this danger so much so that they continue to commemorate *Khater Kone* [Tat. 'Memory Day'] on the second Sunday in October by marching from Kazan's central *Ploshchad' Svobody* [Ru. 'Freedom Square'] to the Kazan Kremlin.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Rorlich (1986) explains that Pelenski (1974) drew on structural anthropology and applied the principle of binary opposition in his delineation of the two ethnic groups (note 2, p. 207).

<sup>19</sup> Faller (2011) suggests that linguistic knowledge started playing into the perceived ethnic differences only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (p. 7).

<sup>20</sup> The public commemoration of (and participation in) the Memory Day was at its peak during the Tatars' Sovereignty Movement in the 1990s, as Faller's (2011) description of the event illustrates (p. 283). Admittedly, according to the archives of the pro-Moscow Tatarstani newspaper *Vecherniaia Kazan'* (its re-print of the coverage of the event in 1992), about 1,000 "radicals" gathered for the event in 1992 ("Den' pamiati," 2013). In comparison, only about a hundred people publicly commemorated the event by gathering in the Freedom Square in 2012, according to the Tatar-Bashkir Service of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFL/RL) ("Kazanda Khäter," 2012).



### **Post-Soviet 1990's Sovereignty Movement as Precursor to Muslim Revival**

The 1990s Tatar sovereignty (independence) movement left an important mark in the history of post-Soviet Tatarstan and contributed to the Tatar Muslim revival. The independence movement took multiple forms, but its key ideas trace their roots to both Russian Imperial and Soviet policies toward minorities. The Soviet rule (1922-1991),<sup>21</sup> in particular, not only repressed religious freedoms and minority rights, but also deprived Tatars of a possibility of having an autonomous Volga-Ural state that they had envisioned as a territorial and political sanctuary.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, the Tatar sovereignty project's efforts were primarily focused on political (national) independence from Russia. Additionally, in its discursive and symbolic form—perhaps the most prominent form at the popular level—a call for sovereignty manifested in revitalization of the Tatar language in both public and private domains.

In addition to the language revitalization efforts, the sovereignty movement manifested in Tatars' renewed interest in religion as an inseparable part of Tatar identity and their efforts to build their social relations and worlds in accordance with norms that were perceived to be "Tatar." In other words, Islam played a symbolic role, as opposed to being a powerful force of its own.<sup>23</sup> However, as the sovereignty movement's goals and aspirations became less possible to realize by the first years of the 21 century, leading to

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<sup>21</sup> While these dates refer to the period when the Bolsheviks in the region were officially in power, the Volga area was intermittently under the Bolshevik rule during the civil war (since 1919). See Richard Pipes (1997), *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923*. Harvard University Press.

<sup>22</sup> Matsuzato (2001) contends that Tatars' failure to secure territorial autonomy following the events of 1917 affected the way Tatar nationalists formulated their slogans during the final decade of the Soviet Union's collapse (p. 49).

<sup>23</sup> Following Mukhametshin (2009), I suggest that such ethnicity-religion dynamic, in which religion was a marker of ethnicity, was a reflection of the decades-long Soviet state's official policy of atheism, which forced religion out of the domain of everyday life. It is also likely that, as former Communists, the leaders of the Tatarstan sovereignty project at the government level (such as Mintimer Shaimiev, Rafael Khakimov) did not perceive religion as a key component in the process.

Tatars' disappointment and loss of hope in legitimate political processes, Islam began to play a more prominent role in the way Tatars envisioned their identity and future. This is because, I argue, in the context where certain social and political goals (such as those articulated by the sovereignty movement) are unattainable, Muslim piety provides an alternative way for personal and social transformation.

It has been posited that the demise of the Soviet Union was the result of the “triumph of the nations” (Helene d’Encausse, as cited in Graney, 1993, p. 80).<sup>24</sup> Gorbachev’s political experiments, known as *perestroika* [Ru. ‘restructuring’] and *glasnost* [Ru. ‘openness’], resulted not only in the reshaping of the country’s political system from the top, but in the widespread national mobilization on the part of the Soviet Union’s republics of all levels. The Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was one of many political units (ranging from Union Republics<sup>25</sup> to Autonomous Okrugs<sup>26</sup>) of the Soviet Union that lined up to get some sort of independence, or sovereignty, from it. It has also been posited that Tatarstan’s quest for sovereignty in the 1990s—the most momentous time in the history of Tatars since the Bolshevik revolution—is a legacy of Tatars’ failure to obtain the Idel-Ural state and, after the revolution, the status of the Union republic despite repeated attempts (Matsuzato, 2001).

On August 30, 1990, the Supreme Soviet of the Tatar ASSR adopted the “Declaration of the State Sovereignty of the Tatar S.S.R.” This political move has been considered a compromising step on the part of the Tatar political elite—which was still

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<sup>24</sup> For alternative interpretation of the reasons for the Soviet Union’s collapse, see, for example, Ronald Suny (2010) *Russia, the USSR, and the successor state* (especially chapter 21, “The end of the Soviet Union”), Oxford University Press.

<sup>25</sup> Largest units of the USSR with the highest level of sovereignty, manifested in their own constitution, state symbols, and a theoretical right to secede from USSR (somewhat similar to states).

<sup>26</sup> Smaller units within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (part of the USSR) with the lowest level of sovereignty (somewhat similar to counties).

Communist and headed by the Republic's communist leader Mintimer Shaimiev—that sought to both appease the burgeoning Tatar nationalist movement<sup>27</sup> and negotiate a privileged status for the republic (and thus its leadership) (Graney, 1999; Matsuzato, 2001). In practice, the declaration of sovereignty originally resulted in symbolic and discursive claims to independence, as opposed to immediate institutional or material gains. However, the declaration of sovereignty, even as a symbolic political act, would not have been possible without some nationalist impetus at the popular level. It was demonstrated in the 1992 referendum, in which 61.4% of voters supported sovereignty (Iskhakov, 2005, p. 145).

While Graney (1999) argues that Tatarstan's 1990s sovereignty project<sup>28</sup> initially focused on undoing Russification policies of the Soviet Era and on Tatarization at the expense of the needs of other nationalities—manifested in increasing the number of Tatars in the government, reopening Tatar language schools, making Tatar a second official language of the Republic, and institutionalizing Tatar holidays—it was not a “racial nationalism” because even the staunchest supporters of Tatarstan's complete autonomy imagined it as a “multinational polity” (Wertheim, 2003a, p. 18). Moreover, the sovereignty project was not uniform and was also represented by a grassroots

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<sup>27</sup> The movement was led by the Tatar nationalist organization *Tatarskii Obshchestvennyi Tsentr* (TOTs) [Ru. ‘The Tatar Public Center’], founded in 1988. Matsuzato (2001) contends that the organization was headed by prominent members of the Tatar Communist party, such as Rafael Khakimov, and thus was heavily influenced by the then Communist Party. The Tatar ethnologist and activist Damir Iskhakov suggests that the organization (and the movement) traced its roots to the Tatar intelligentsia who, as early as 1960-1970s, attempted to revitalize Tatar history, education, and political status (Iskhakov, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> From the political science point of view, Graney (1999) defines Tatarstan's political project of the 1990s as “sub-state sovereignty” because it did not involve the actual secession from Russia, Tatarstan did not establish its own army, currency, or border controls (p. 3). At best, Tatarstan was able “to negotiate favorable new tax regimes with the Russian Federation, to pursue lucrative international financial ties, and to expand and consolidate [its] domestic political control (Graney, 1999, p. 3).

sovereignty movement, whose ideas about, goals for, and means of achieving sovereignty did not mirror the official political version of it, as Faller's (2011) study illustrates.<sup>29</sup>

Drawing on Brubaker (1994), Verdery (1996), and Martin (2001), among others, Faller (2011) suggests that the roots of the 1990s nationalisms, including Tatar nationalism, can be traced to the Soviet nationalities policies, which sought to contain national sentiment of non-Russians by creating territory-specific national homelands. She observes: "post-Soviet nationalisms do not reveal the existence of age-old ethnic rivalries, but rather emerge from structures of feeling constructed by Soviet nationality policies" (Faller, 2011, p. 10). So, if an arbitrarily-drawn territorial boundary defined the geographical form of a non-Russian "nation," language was one of the components that filled its content<sup>30</sup> (at least during the initial stage of the Soviet *korenizatsiia* [Ru. 'indigenization'] policy), and one Soviet state was what housed all of them.

This is not to say that Tatars lacked national consciousness prior to 1917<sup>31</sup> and needed to be helped along in their development from being a "primordial" ethnic group to a modern nation.<sup>32</sup> Rather, the Soviet nationalities policy contributed to the direction and form of the nationalisms of the 1990s. This is why the 1990s Tatar nationalism project focused, first and foremost, on sovereignty, which, in turn, had multiple forms. In its

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<sup>29</sup> I consider the strength of Faller's (2011) study in its ethnographic approach to investigating the everyday implications of the Tatar sovereignty project, in that she convincingly illustrates how individual actors—ordinary residents of Tatarstan—understood sovereignty and acted upon their understanding(s) in every day life.

<sup>30</sup> In addition to national territories and national languages, national elites and national cultures were thought to be key components of the Bolsheviks nationalities policy (Martin, 2001, p. 10).

<sup>31</sup> As Rorlich (1986), for example, illustrates, Tatars' sense of national identity was well developed by the time of the Revolution, which was particularly evident in the reformist movement of the early eighteenth-early twentieth centuries. She further points out that language played an important role in their sense of national identity (p. 65). I thank Audrey Altstadt for pointing this out.

<sup>32</sup> Hirsch (2005) explains that at the root of the Bolsheviks' nationalities policy was a belief in state-sponsored evolutionism. She further explains that "state-sponsored evolutionism was . . . premised on the belief that 'primordial' ethnic groups were the building blocks of nationalities *and* on the assumption that the state could intervene in the natural process of development and 'construct' modern nations. . . . The short-term goal of state-sponsored evolutionism was to 'assist' the potential victims of *Soviet* economic modernization, and thus to differentiate the Soviet state from the 'imperialistic empires' it disdained. The long-term goal was to usher the *entire* population through the Marxist timeline of historical development: to transform feudal-era clans and tribes into nationalities, and nationalities into socialist-era nations—which, at some point in the future, would merge together under communism" (pp. 8-9).

discursive and symbolic forms, the most prominent forms at the grassroots level, a call for sovereignty manifested itself in revitalization of the Tatar language. In fact, it was at the forefront of the sovereignty project, while religion (Islam) played a symbolic role, as opposed to being a powerful force of its own.

Indeed, as the *korenizatsiia* policy was believed to have reached its goal and was stopped by the 1930s,<sup>33</sup> it was shortly followed by the opposite development: ethnic schools and publishing houses were closed and “national cadres” replaced with Russians. As a result, out of 31 Tatar national schools functioning in Kazan in 1917, only two were open by 1945 (Faller 2011, p. 9), and the Tatar language education took place mostly in the private space of people’s homes (mostly in rural areas). As Russian was made the only official language and the only language used in college entrance exams, in 1969 only one third of Tatars attended eleven higher education institutions in the republic, while representing 49.1% of the republic’s total population (Rorlich, 1986, p. 160).<sup>34</sup> By the 1980s, only 12% of the republic’s students<sup>35</sup> studied in Tatar (mostly in rural areas), and only one Tatar school remained open (in Kazan) (Musina, 2004).

It was not surprising then that at the grassroots level, Tatarstan’s move to sovereignty materialized in attempts to revitalize the Tatar language in all domains and in the creation of two discursive worlds (one, accessible to Tatar speakers, and the other, to

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<sup>33</sup> As the case with the Tatar national Communist Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev illustrates, the real reason for overturning *korenizatsiia* was the Bolshevik authorities’ fear of the nationalist sentiment’s potential of turning into bourgeois nationalism. A former *jadid*, he grew interested in revolutionary socialism and eventually joined the Bolsheviks in 1917. He advised Stalin on nationality issues until 1923 when he was accused of pan-Islamic and pan-Turkic activities. He was executed on Stalin’s order in the late 1930s. Audrey Altstadt (personal communication, May 29, 2013) suggests that Sultan-Galiev’s crime was not just nationalism, but altering Lenin’s interpretation of socialism as anti-imperialism. She points out that, using Britain and India as an example, Sultan-Galiev argued that the oppressed in a colonial nation could still oppress the colonial peoples, referring to Muslims in Russia. For more information on Sultan-Galiev’s case, see Rorlich (1986).

<sup>34</sup> A case in point is Taskira *apa* [Tat. ‘aunt’], an older Tatar woman I interviewed and whose story I present and analyze in chapter 8.

<sup>35</sup> Students in secondary schools (an approximate equivalent of K-12 in the United States).

the rest) as the fate of the Tatar language stood for the fate of the Tatar “nation” (Faller, 2011).<sup>36</sup>

At the state level, Tatarstan’s sovereignty project resulted in the republic government’s ability to negotiate a favorable economic regime vis-à-vis Moscow,<sup>37</sup> which translated into a higher standard of living for Tatarstan’s residents and political control (and thus financial privileges) for the Republic’s elites. Matsuzato (2001) argues that Tatarstan’s sovereignty as a political project was possible largely due to Tatarstan’s former Soviet leader and first president Mintimer Shaimiev’s ability to pressure Moscow for political and economic concessions, especially by means of insuring Tatarstan’s electoral vote in support of Yeltsin in the 1991 and 1996 presidential elections. However, as Yeltsin’s position began to weaken, Putin’s ascent to power in 2000 marked the end of the sovereignty projects and the beginning of centralizing reforms that undid successions gained by republics previously. While Shaimiev managed to remain in power for another two terms,<sup>38</sup> he was unable to preserve previously-negotiated political gains for Tatarstan: the 1994 bilateral treaty with Moscow was dissolved and replaced with a new (2007) agreement, which no longer defines Tatarstan as a “sovereign” state.

While Graney (1999) contends that, despite Putin’s centralizing reforms, Tatarstan’s government (headed by Medvedev’s appointee Rustam Minnikhanov since 2010) is able to continue to negotiate with Moscow, I support Faller’s (2011) assessment that “Tatarstan sovereignty as a popular movement no longer exists and that Tatarstan’s nation-builders’ aspirations have become largely denuded of political thrust” (p. 12).

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<sup>36</sup> This sentiment is also expressed by the sovereignty movement activist and my interviewee Taskira *apa* who, while becoming a practicing Muslim later in life, continued to believe that the livelihood of the Tatar nation rested on the livelihood of the Tatar language.

<sup>37</sup> Originally through the 1992 referendum and Constitution and the 1994 bilateral treaty with Moscow.

<sup>38</sup> Matsuzato (2001) contends that despite the 1999 political battles between Putin and Shaimiev, Putin needed Shaimiev’s support, which ensured Shaimiev’s leadership position in the republic (p. 71).

According to Tatar ethnologist Damir Iskhakov (2004, 2005), reasons for the decline of the national movement are complex and include, but are not limited to, the inability of supporters of complete autonomy to realize their aspirations, absence of leaders, lack of support from the Tatarstan's government that itself was limited by its relations with Moscow, and inability to develop an ideology that would reflect the interests of the entire Tatar society, not just its factions. The centralizing reforms of the Russian government initiated by Putin certainly played their role even at a symbolic level, as illustrated by Tatarstan's 1999 law that legitimized a Latin-based Tatar alphabet, but was struck down by the Russian Duma's anti-latinization measure in 2000.<sup>39</sup>

Whatever the case may be, Faller (2011) concludes: "A loss of hope in their ability to create sustained political change or to live in freedom has caused many former nation-builders and other Tatars to increasingly turn to religion as a source of inspiration and refuge, to burrow deeper into Islamic teaching as a way to protect themselves from the outside world" (p. 297). While I also observed a shift from Tatars' focus on reviving their language and obtaining sovereignty to their growing interest in Islam (Karimova, 2010), it would be incorrect to conclude that practicing Muslim Tatar women whom I have met throughout fieldwork turn to Islam as a result of unrealized ethno-national aspirations. Rather, the Tatar sovereignty movement's inability to engender sustainable change may have contributed to the overall instability of post-soviet conditions in which people have to create new ways of being and look for new meanings in the quickly-changing world around them. As my discussion in chapters 4, 5, and 6 illustrates, I argue that behind Tatars' interest in Islam is the promise of being part of the *Ummah*

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<sup>39</sup> Faller's (2011) chapter 3 provides an excellent account of the role of symbolic capital, such as alphabets, in creating certain subjects.

[Arabic]—the global community of Muslims—with its sense of collective responsibility and moral duty incumbent upon all members of the Islamic community, which may provide a source of inspiration for Tatars. In the context of the present-day Russian state where Tatars’ aspirations for political and cultural autonomy are impossible to realize, Muslim piety becomes an alternative path to personal and social transformation.

### **Muslim Revival in Tatarstan**<sup>40</sup>

Tatars, like Central Asian Muslims, have traditionally practiced the Hanafi *madhhab* [Ar. ‘Muslim school of law’] the oldest, and typically perceived as the most liberal, of the four main Sunni Muslim schools of religious law.<sup>41</sup> The Russian conquest of 1552 and subsequent policies turned Islam into a symbol of the Tatar national (and not just religious) identity (Mukhametshin, 2009, p. 35). The Soviet state’s policy of atheism further pushed Islam into the realm of cultural traditions and rituals, resulting in its vernacularization.<sup>42</sup> The Tatar Muslim revival that has taken place over the past two decades is marked by the fact that Islam is once again becoming a force in its own right, as opposed to a synonym for Tatars’ ethno-national identity. The revival is supported by a number of facts. While in 1988, three years before the Soviet Union’s collapse, there were 18 Muslim communities in Tatarstan, by 1998 their number increased to over 700<sup>43</sup> (Mukhametshin, 2009, p. 38). The number of Muslim religious organizations registered

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<sup>40</sup> In my treatment of the Tatars’ religious revival, I draw on Hirschkind’s (2006) conceptualization of the Islamic Revival, based on Egypt’s example, as “not a given socio-ideological formation but a contingent and shifting constellation of ideas, practices and associational forms” (p. 207).

<sup>41</sup> The other three are Hanbali, Maliki, and Shafi’i.

<sup>42</sup> I borrow the term “vernacular” from Flueckiger (2006) who uses it to describe a “popular, non-institutionally based Islamic practice” (p. 2).

<sup>43</sup> According to Musina, in 2007 there were over 2,000 Muslim communities in Tatarstan (R. Musina, personal communication, June 20, 2013).



in Tatarstan as of January 1, 2013 was 1193; mosques owned and used by Muslims – 1382 (compared to only 18 mosques in 1988) (Musina, 2013).

According to sociological survey data, the number of Tatars who identified themselves as *veruiushchie* [Ru. ‘believers’] rose from 34% in 1990 to 66% in 1994, to 81% in 1998, to 83.3% in 2002 (Musina, 2008), and to 87% in 2011/2012 (Musina, 2012b). The same sociological studies (Musina 2008) suggested that the number of urban Tatars who attended mosques on a regular basis rose from 7.9% in 1990 to 24.4% in 2001, and to 33.7% in 2002. Musina (2008, 2012b) argues that, while there is some indication of an increase in religious practice and confessional consciousness, the data suggest a larger rise in religious consciousness. Unlike religious practice and confessional consciousness that are tied to a specific religion, religious consciousness is characterized by one's “general” belief in God.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, the then deputy of Tatarstan’s chief mufti Valiulla Iakupov<sup>45</sup> in a personal interview suggested that the number of practicing Muslims among Tatars remained low, around ten percent, although, no official records were kept and statistics available, according to him (V. Iakupov, personal communication, 2009). However, a sociological survey among Tatar youth suggests that the number of practicing Tatars among them is rising. For example the number of practicing Muslim Tatars who observe religious rituals rose from 4.1% in 2001 to 12.2% in 2004 (Khodzhaeva and Shumilova, 2008).<sup>46</sup> Based on a more recent (2011/2012) survey, Musina (2012b) also found that the age group with

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<sup>44</sup> In sociological survey data, religious consciousness is measured by asking: “Do you believe in God? Are you a believer?” (Musina, 2008, p. 97).

<sup>45</sup> Iakupov was assassinated on July 19, 2012, by what was believed to be terrorists (see, for example, a transcript of Vladimir Putin’s speech during his visit to Tatarstan shortly after the event (“Poezdka v Tatarstan,” 2012)). Alexei Malashenko, a Moscow-based Carnegie center expert on Islam in Russia, also attributed the killing to “radicals” in his 2013 article “The dynamics of Russian Islam” (Malashenko, 2013).

<sup>46</sup> The authors point out that one’s religious practice does not always indicate high degree of religious competence when it comes to theological knowledge. They further point out that observing Tatars tend to come from backgrounds with a strong ethnic (Tatar) component.

the lowest percentage of individuals who identified themselves as non-believers was Tatars 35 years of age and under. The Tatar historian and ethnologist Damir Iskhakov (2010) observes that Tatarstan's religious revival is not an isolated local phenomenon, but rather a post-Soviet one.<sup>47</sup> In Russia, for example, the number of mosques rose from about 160 in 1991 to over 8000 in 2009, as did the number of students seeking Muslim religious education abroad (four in 1991 and about 1,000 in 2009) (Goble, 2009).

While Iskhakov (2013b) posits that the Tatars' interest in Islam is an indicator of their growing "ethno-confessional nationalism" as opposed to "religious consciousness" (p. 1), my research demonstrates that there are Tatars who do display "religious consciousness" and no longer conflate ethnic, national, and religious elements of their identity. Furthermore, as I illustrate throughout the dissertation, and particularly in chapter 8, age plays a role in the way Tatar women perceive the role of Islam vis-à-vis ethno-national elements of their identity. I conclude that the younger generation of Tatar women (below thirty years old) exhibit a more pronounced interest in Islam as a defining element of their identity. This tendency is exemplified in the younger generation's belief that to be a Tatar and to be a Muslim are two different things. This belief further underscores the emphasis that the younger generation places on Islamic knowledge and daily practice that are not synonymous with Tatar ethnic traditions and occasional religious observations. I suggest that the older generation of Tatars (especially sixty and older) is also becoming more interested in Islam, even though the ethnic and national components of Tatar identity, such as the Tatar language, for example, remain equally important to them.

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<sup>47</sup> Current estimates indicate the number of Muslims in Russia is close to 20 million (Malashenko, 2013).

The fact that Islam in Tatarstan is becoming an important force in its own right is further supported by the proliferation of new mosques, Islamic educational institutions, media, businesses, services, and women in Islamic dress. As I demonstrate in chapter 8, Tatars'—and other Russian Muslims'—interest in Islam is further illustrated by a debate over what kind of Islam the Tatars (and other Muslims living in Russia) should practice. Some scholars<sup>48</sup> and public officials<sup>49</sup> suggest that the opening of borders after the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the newly-acquired religious freedom which came in its wake resulted in radical, specifically Wahhabi/Salafi,<sup>50</sup> forms of “non-

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Galina Emelianova, “Transnational Islam versus Ethnic Islam in Eastern Europe: The Role of the Mass Media” in *Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and across Europe*, eds. Stefano Allievi and Jorgen S. Nielsen (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003), 243-280; Humphries, Conrad, Salakhadinova, and Kouznetsova-Morekno (2005), New ethnic identity: The Islamitization [sic.] process in the Russian Federation, *International Review of Modern Sociology* 31(2), 207-231.

<sup>49</sup> For example, in a recent article, Artur Lukmanov, first Secretary in Russia's department on new Challenges and threats of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian federation, claimed that radical Islam is quickly spreading throughout former Soviet Union and Russia's Volga region and now poses a political threat (Lukmanov, 2013, pp. 108-109). Lukmanov (2013) based his conclusions on statements by Rais Suleimanov, head of the Volga branch of the Russian Institute of Strategic Research. Suleimanov's claims about the threat of radical Islam in the Volga region and about Tatarstan's ethnic policies have been openly questioned by academics specializing in research on present-day Islam and ethno-religious relations in Russia/Tatarstan (see, for example, Iskhakov (2013c), Titova (2012), Isaev, (n.d.)).

<sup>50</sup> Esposito (2003) explains the origin of the term “Wahhabis” (plural of “Wahhabi”) in the following way: “Eighteenth-century reformist/revivalist movement for sociomoral reconstruction of society. Founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, a Hanbali scholar, in Arabia. Proclaimed tawhid (uniqueness and unity of God) as its primary doctrine. Began in response to the perceived moral decline and political weakness of the Muslim community in Arabia. Proposed a return to an idealized Islamic past through reassertion of monotheism and reliance on *Quran* and hadith, rejecting medieval interpretations of Islam and jurisprudence. Emphasized education and knowledge as weapons in dealing with nonbelievers. Known for its sometimes violent opposition to the popular cult of saints, idolatry, and shrine and tomb visitation, as well as the sacking of Shii shrines in Najaf and Karbala in 1802. Formed an alliance with Muhammad ibn Saud in 1747, which served as the basis for the consolidation of the present-day kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Referred to as Wahhabis by opponents, but referred to themselves as Muwahhidun, or those upholding the doctrine of tawhid” (“Wahhabis,” 2003). He explains the origin of the term “Salafi” as follows: “Name (derived from salaf, “pious ancestors”) given to a reform movement led by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh at the turn of the twentieth century. Emphasized restoration of Islamic doctrines to pure form, adherence to the *Quran* and Sunnah, rejection of the authority of later interpretations, and maintenance of the unity of ummah. Prime objectives were to rid the Muslim ummah of the centuries-long mentality of taqlid (unquestioning imitation of precedent) and stagnation and to reform the moral, cultural, and political conditions of Muslims. Essentially intellectual and modernist in nature. Worked to assert the validity of Islam in modern times, prove its compatibility with reason and science, and legitimize the acquisition of Western scientific and technological achievements. Sought reforms of Islamic law, education, and Arabic language. Viewed political reform as an essential requirement for revitalization of the Muslim community. Its influence spread to Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Syria, India, Indonesia, and Egypt in particular. The most influential movements inspired by Salafi were the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and Jamaat-i Islami of Pakistan. In the late twentieth century, the term came to refer to traditionalist reformers” (“Salafi,” 2003). In the context of present-day Russia, these terms are controversial because they are often used interchangeably to refer to what are perceived as conservative forms of Islam, regardless of whether those forms of Islam can be considered Wahhabi/Salafi on a theological, and not political, basis. Altstadt (2013) further observes that Russian authorities routinely apply these terms to Muslims whom they want to suppress (A. Altstadt, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

traditional and transnational Islam”<sup>51</sup> spreading among post-Soviet Muslims via educational opportunities abroad and local schools funded by foreign sources, foreign Muslim missionaries, religious literature, and other channels. At the root of this fear is the “good Muslim/bad Muslim” paradigm, manifested in today’s “Culture Talk,” a type of public discourse that views culture (understood as modernity) or its absence as the dividing line between those who value civic coexistence and those who espouse violence (Mamdani, 2004). This paradigm treats modern political movements that capitalize on Islam (such as Islamists) as primordial cultural or religious entities, which are inherently opposed to what’s believed to be progressive, secular values. Such a paradigm requires that a judgment value be placed on Muslims on the basis of compatibility of their form of Islam (manifested in their actions) with those values.

In the Russian context, this paradigm is manifested in the Russian government’s response to Islamic revival and the government’s attempts to control the religious space. Akhmetkarimov (2012) observes: “two decades of state policies toward Islam resulted in nation-wide controversies over the nature and the level of state involvement in religious affairs” (p. 1). Among such controversial acts is the Russian state’s attempt to support an “official” Islam by encouraging Muslim clergy to restructure Muslim institutions to create a strict administrative hierarchy. However, in the absence of agreement on what “official” Islam is or should be, such a task becomes impossible.<sup>52</sup> This is demonstrated by a recent controversy over local authorities’ bans on headscarves in Russia’s public

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<sup>51</sup> Emelianova, “Transnational Islam versus Ethnic Islam in Eastern Europe: The Role of the Mass Media,” p. 245.

<sup>52</sup> For one possible definition of “official Islam,” Akhmetkarimov (2012) refers to Mukhametshin, who defines it as Islam “based on general (normative) Islamic principles stripped of the national roots of indigenous religious thought” (as cited in Akhmetkarimov, 2012, footnote 3).

schools. The bans generated lawsuits and a heated public discussion.<sup>53</sup> It also prompted Russia's President Vladimir Putin to make the following public statement in a recent press conference: "When it comes to hijabs: you know that in our culture (when I say – 'our,' I mean traditional Islam) hijabs don't exist. . . . And we are going to implement traditions that are foreign to us – why? And, of course, we all have to pay attention to this, and talk about it directly, and refer in this case, of course, to the representatives of traditional Islam."<sup>54</sup> Based on Putin's quote, then, "official Islam" is "traditional Islam," but what constitutes the latter is usually defined by what it is not: "foreign."

In this context, the Tatarstan regional government and Muslim clergy have had to perform a tough balancing act of supporting Tatars' religious revival, while also ensuring that Tatars' religious sentiments do not threaten Russia's unity. As I demonstrate in chapter 8 on piety stories as sites of Tatars' identity struggle, one significant way religious revival manifests itself among ordinary Tatars, Muslim clergy, and government officials today is in a debate over the extent and the kind of Islam Tatars should practice. In the Tatarstan context, the "official" or "traditional Islam" has been associated with the notion of "Tatar Islam." Tatarstani historian Rafik Mukhametshin characterizes "Tatar Islam" as a "fusion of Islam with Tatar ethnic and cultural norms and practices" (2009, p. 34).<sup>55</sup> He argues that the way Islam evolved in the territory of present-day Tatarstan

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<sup>53</sup> For a brief coverage of the Tatarstan case in the Russian media, see, for example, (Postnov, 2013). For a reaction from a member of the Tatarstan Muslim clergy, see Batrov (2013). For a discussion of the Stavropol case in the Russian media, see, for example, (Ol'shanskii, 2013). For a Russian nationalist point of view, see ("Stavropol'skii krai," 2012). For a brief summary of the Stavropol case in English, see Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty report ("Head scarves," 2012). For discussions on political meanings behind the Muslim veil in a secular state, see, for example: in Turkey, Gole (1996); in France, Moruzzi (1994), Carle (2004); in Egypt, Mahmood (2005); for comparative analyses see Benhabib (2010), Ahmed (2011).

<sup>54</sup> My translation from Russian. The exact words are as follows: "Что касается хиджабов: Вы знаете, ведь в нашей культуре (когда я говорю – нашей, я имею в виду традиционный ислам) никаких хиджабов нет. [. . .] А мы у себя будем внедрять чуждые нам традиции – зачем? И конечно, мы все должны на это обращать внимание, и прямо об этом говорить, и опираться в данном случае, конечно, на представителей традиционного ислама" (The official website of the Russian President Vladimir Putin, <http://президент.рф/news/17173>).

<sup>55</sup> Also see Mukhametshin (2005).

played an important role: geographical remoteness of the region from both Central Asia and Middle East, the heartlands of Islam at the time, enabled Tatars to develop flexible religious and legal systems over a period of six centuries. As a result, Islam among Tatars “developed not so much in the context of abstract Islamic doctrine, but rather under the impact of specific local social, economic and political conditions” (Mukhametshin, 2009, p. 34). He further observes that after the Russian invasion of 1552 and religious oppression that followed, Tatars’ religious tradition came to stand for independence, informing Tatars’ political and social life. Finally, the two distinctive features of “Tatar Islam” were a variety of ways in which ethnic traditions contributed to various understandings of Islam by different social strata, and a Sufi component<sup>56</sup> (particularly the Yasawiyya and Naqshbandiyya brotherhoods).

There is, however, a lack of agreement on what Tatar traditional Islam actually means theologically and practically, as Tatar intellectuals, local Muslim clergy, and average Tatars have interpreted the concept differently.<sup>57</sup> Based on those interpretations, I

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<sup>56</sup> For more information on the Sufi tradition in the Volga region, see Kemper (2008).

<sup>57</sup> Mukhametshin (2009) suggests that, unlike their predecessors who interpreted Islam from a strictly theological perspective, present-day Tatar intellectuals ground their interpretations in multiple frameworks (including a secular one) and often view Islam’s vis-à-vis its relationship to Tatar nationalism and modernity, stripping it of its theological essence. One example is an interpretation offered by a Tatar national intellectual Rashat Safin in his book *Tatar Yuly* [Tat. ‘Tatar way’], where Safin sees Tatar Islam as a democratic, liberating force that frees one from any type of authority (political or religious) and allows one to control one’s own life. Further, Safin argues that what’s often viewed as “normative Islam” is, in fact, an “Arab” form of Islam (Safin, 2001). Another, more secularized, version of “Tatar” Islam is “*Evroislam*” [Ru. Euroislam] advanced by Rafael Khakimov, a Tatar politician and former advisor to Tatarstan’s first President Mintimer Shaimiev. In his 2003 book *Gde Nasha Mekka?* [Ru. ‘Where is our Mecca?’] (under his shortened last name Khakim) and a recent internet article, Khakimov (2013) approaches Islam vis-à-vis its relationship to modernity and argues that Islam is compatible with modernity so far as Islam is interpreted in such a way that it facilitates modernization. He goes so far as to suggest that even religious practices that constitute the pillars of Islam, such as the five daily prayers, should be subject to a personal interpretation and thus are not binding on a Muslim. Finally, Khakimov denies the validity of *madhhabs* [Ar. ‘Muslim school of law’] in favor of Qur’an and *Sunnah* [Ar. ‘normative conduct based on the Prophet Muhammad’s example’]. One of Khakimov’s critics was a Tatar Muslim scholar and clergy Vailulla Iakupov who argued that Tatars should revive Islam based on their ancestors’ religious tradition (“*Islam traditsii*” [Ru. ‘Islam of tradition’]), where tradition is sacred religious knowledge, thought, and philosophy, not just religious institutions and norms.<sup>57</sup> Iakupov argued that there was never tension between Islam and science, and therefore there was no need to “reform” Islam to make it compatible with modernity (2004a). Finally, Iakupov rejected *madhhab*-free interpretations of Islam, arguing that *madhhabs* serve as safeguards of the sacredness of the religious knowledge, systemizing it in accordance with *Sunnah* and protecting it from irrelevant facts. He called on

suggest that, in line with Putin’s definition of “traditional Islam,” Tatar traditional Islam is often defined by what it is not, or in its juxtaposition with what are perceived to be “non-Tatar” forms of Islam. Iskhakov’s (2013a, 2013b, 2013c) recent analysis of the meaning politicians and clergy ascribe to Tatar “traditional Islam” supports this observation. In particular, Iskhakov (2013a) states: “In recent years, we time and again hear from Russia’s, including Tatarstan’s, politicians of all levels that they are advocates of ‘traditional Islam.’ In addition, it seems, the very concept of ‘Tatar Islam’ is perceived by them as something quite ‘internal’ and, thus, unambiguous and clear, especially in relation to ‘external’ Islam, which in their eyes is completely ‘foreign,’ or at least—suspicious” (p. 1).<sup>58</sup>

I would further suggest that while intellectuals, clergy, and some politicians—in other words, people who have some familiarity with Islamic theology—associate “Tatar Islam” with the Hanafi *madhhab*, an average Tatar perceives “Tatar Islam” as the kind of Islam Tatars observed before the post-Soviet opening of the borders. As I illustrate in chapter 8, non-Tatar, or foreign, forms of Islam are further equated with the kind of Islam practiced by “Arabs.” In practical terms, it means that such observances of Muslim piety as the headscarf, a diet that excludes pork, alcohol, and other products that are prohibited by the Muslim normative law, or separation of space in accordance with gender lines are

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Tatars to remain loyal to the Hanafi tradition, which, he believed, was preserved among Tatars in its purest form and informed the Tatar mentality and national character.

<sup>58</sup> My translation of the following original quote in Russian: “В последнее время от российских политиков разного уровня, включая и татарстанских, мы раз за разом слышим о том, что они являются приверженцами «традиционного ислама». При этом, видимо, сам концепт «традиционного ислама» представляется им чем-то очень «внутренним», а поэтому понятным и ясным, особенно по отношению к исламу «внешнему», в их глазах совершенно «чуждому», во всяком случае – подозрительному.” Iskhakov (2013c) further argues that Tatars possess the theological legacy and intellectual capacity to develop such an understanding of “traditional Islam” that would spread its influence on the “Muslim world,” and not the other way around as is happening now. The problem, Iskhakov (2013c) states, is that such a concept of traditional Islam would unite the Muslim Tatar community to a degree that will create a political threat to Russia’s current non-democratic regime. Therefore, Iskhakov (2013c) concludes that, while Russia’s politicians encourage “traditional Islam,” they do not support its development in practice (p. 2).

perceived as “Arab,” non-Tatar Islam. In this context, practicing Muslim Tatar women are often seen deviating from the “Tatar” norm and are often the subjects of heated debates and controversy. This is why, I argue, Muslim Tatar women’s stories about their paths to Muslim piety serve as discursive sites where Tatars’ struggle over the role of Islam in their identity and future takes place.

### **The Role of Women in the Recent Muslim Revival**

The role of women in the recent Muslim revival is prominent for a number of reasons. Musina (2006) suggests the present-day Muslim revival among Tatars is typical in that, based on sociological survey data, women are more religious than men.

According to a 1994 survey, among women, 42% identified themselves as practicing Muslims, in comparison with only 19% of men. However, only ten percent of women identified themselves as non-believers, in comparison with 25% of men.<sup>59</sup> In a 1999 survey the gap between women and men who identified themselves as practicing believers was smaller: 35% of women identified themselves as practicing (vs. 30% of men). At the same time, the number of those who identified themselves as non-believers was higher among men (21%) vs. women (13%)<sup>60</sup> (Musina, 2006; R. Musina, personal communication, June 20, 2013). More recent data support a similar trend: in a 2011 survey among 506 urban Tatars (251 men and 255 women), 32.3% of women identified themselves as practicing, in comparison with 50.2% of men<sup>61</sup> (Musina, 2012a). In a 2012

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<sup>59</sup> Among women, the rest of the numbers were as follows: 35% were non-practicing believers and 13% were undecided; among men, 35% were non-practicing believers and 20% were undecided.

<sup>60</sup> According to the 1999 survey, 41% of women identified themselves as non-practicing believers and 16% were undecided. Among men, these numbers were 32% and 17%, respectively.

<sup>61</sup> The rest of the data broke down as follows: 45% of men and 40.4% of women identified themselves as symbolic (non-practicing believers); 8.4% of men and 5.5% of women were undecided; 13.5% of men and 3.1% of women identified themselves as non-believers; 0.8% of men and 0.8% of women had difficulty answering.



survey among 301 rural Tatars (147 men and 154 women), 71.4% of women identified themselves as practicing, in comparison with 46.5% of men<sup>62</sup> (Musina, 2012a).

A prominent role of Tatar women in the recent Muslim revival may be explained by the fact that the status of women and their (Islamic) practices have served as barometers of societal relations and struggles. Furthermore, because Muslim female piety is grounded in physical manifestations (such as the hijab) that may set them apart from other female members of society, they have been historically more politicized. For example, Keller's (1998), Northrop's (2000), and Kamp's (2006) discussions<sup>63</sup> of the fledgling Soviet authorities' fierce fight against the Uzbek practice of veiling—just one among many campaigns geared towards “emancipating” Uzbek women—illustrate that the Muslim veil (or its absence) epitomized gender relations and ultimately served as a window into Uzbek society's norms and values. Similarly, Rorlich's (1986) investigation into the early twentieth century's Volga Tatar religious reformers' debate on the role of women and the legitimacy of the veil revealed that “the veil stood as the symbol of the traditional attitude toward women” (p. 63).

Present-day headscarf controversies indicate that Muslim women—and what they represent—continue to remain politicized. I would further suggest that a simple comparison of hijab-related debates point out to an increasing politicization of Muslim women. When in 2001 a group of practicing Muslim Tatar women filed a lawsuit against the local government's ban on headscarves in passport photographs, the incident generated wide national and international resonance, reflected in active media coverage.

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<sup>62</sup> The rest of the data broke down as follows: 40.8% of men and 22.7% of women identified themselves as symbolic (non-practicing believers); 6.1% of men and 3.9% of women were undecided; 5.4% of men and 1.9% of women identified themselves as non-believers.

<sup>63</sup> As Kandiyoti (2007) observes, these scholars provide different views on the issue.

The pro-Kremlin daily *Izvestiia*'s called on the then Tatarstan president to prevent the women's aspirations from "turning into Islamic extremism-fanaticism-fundamentalism" and "another September 11" (Bovt, 2002). Nonetheless, when the case reached the Russian Supreme Court, the court ruled in favor of the women. In comparison, when local authorities' recently banned headscarves in public schools in the Stavropol *krai* [Ru. 'region'] and Tatarstan, the lawsuits filed on behalf of Muslims were lost.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, the controversies prompted Russia's President Vladimir Putin to weight in on the issue and define the headscarves as a "foreign" tradition that has no place in Russia.

In the Tatar context, as I illustrate in chapter 7 on gender roles, present-day debates on issues related to women (and gender roles) are partly informed by popular beliefs that Tatar women were always more progressive than Muslim women of Central Asia or the Middle East. Their progress is measured by key social issues that are markers of modernity and, as such, are still used to "evaluate" Muslim women today: their appearance (in particular, presence or absence of the scarf), position vis-à-vis men, and access to education. More specifically, it is believed that Tatar women never covered their heads (or covered them only for prayer), never participated in polygyny, and were highly educated. However, as Kandiyoti (2007) points out, these claims are reflective of the *Jadids* ', the nineteenth-century Tatar reformers', normative ideas about women, which were formed in response to Russian imperial representations of Muslim societies as backward and represented an effort to modernize themselves. Moreover, these ideas were not formed in isolation but in a dialogue with other Muslim reformers in Western colonial empires, who also viewed the expansion of women's rights as a key indicator of

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<sup>64</sup> For more information on the recent cases, see footnote 53 above.

progress.<sup>65</sup> Referring to Khalid's (1998) analysis of *Jadidsm* in Central Asia Kandiyoti (2007) observes: "It is within this reformist current that we find the first stirrings of advocacy for an expansion of women's rights. . . . Critiques of the practice of polygyny, the poor treatment of women and their lack of education were central themes in calls for reforms aimed at achieving national renewal and progress" (p. 603).

Rorlich (1986) proposes that the early *Jadids'* debates on modernization as the only way for Tatars' survival prepared ground for cultural, social and political redefining of the role of women, which was in full swing in the early twentieth century. For example, in 1910, the imam of Ufa openly voiced the view of those who believed that the veil had never been a requirement in the *Shari'ah* [Ar. 'Islamic normative law'].<sup>66</sup> Rorlich (1986) further suggest that the evolution of the Tatar society is epitomized by the appointment, in May 1917 during the All-Russian Muslim Congress in Moscow, of Muhlise Bobi,<sup>67</sup> a Tatar teacher from the village of Izh-Bobi, as the first female Muslim judge [Tat. *kaziy*] and a member of the Muslim Religious Board of Ufa. Rorlich concludes that the evolution of Tatar society and religious thought would not have been possible without Tatar women's own active role, high educational level, and determination to defend their own rights (p. 63).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Rorlich (1986) observes, for example, that the leading Tatar *Jadids* Musa Bigi and Rizaeddin Fahreddin were in conversation with Egyptian reformers on the issue of the veil (p. 63). She further points out that the issue of polygamy was openly addressed in an article "Evropeizatsiia Musul'man" [Ru. 'Europeanization of Muslims'], in a 1907 issue of *Penzenskie vedomosti* (a Russian newspaper), which criticized polygamy because "it had a detrimental effect on 'the education of children as future citizens of their country'" (p. 63).

<sup>66</sup> Tatars who argue that Tatar women "never" veiled often refer to (family) photographs of the late nineteenth–early twentieth century period.

<sup>67</sup> For more on the Bobi family, see Makhmutova (2003), Gimazova (2004).

<sup>68</sup> Rorlich (1986) further argues that due to their advanced status and exceptionally high educational level Tatar women, unlike Central Asian women, could not be used by the Soviets as a surrogate proletariat (note 76, p. 218). This claim should be re-evaluated in the light of, for example, Kamp's (2006) observation that Uzbek women's unveiling took place not as a result of their adopting the Soviet ideas and acting as surrogate proletariat, but due to internal struggles taking place in the Uzbek society at the time.

I argue that the impact of these relatively recent, but dramatic, changes in the role and status of Tatar women is demonstrated in the way most Tatars view women vis-à-vis Islam today. I further argue that present-day Tatars' normative ideas about women and gender are also a product of their socio-historical development as a nation. For example, the prevailing discourse among secular Tatars and even an older generation of partially observant Tatars is built around specific ideas of what a "traditional" Muslim Tatar woman is like. According to this discourse, Tatar women never wore the headscarf outside the sacred space of the mosque or during prayers. Those who wore the headscarves all the time, tied them in the back, displaying their necks and covered carefully only for prayer. Along the same lines, it is believed that Tatar women never wore long loose ("baggy") dresses. Further, the notion of polygyny and dowry are also believed to be "foreign" to Tatar women (and men). These ideas about a traditional Tatar woman are often juxtaposed with what's believed to be new (for Tatars) ways of being a Muslim, which come from the "Arab world" or "the Arabs." For women, it is embodied in the way women dress (in long loose dresses), tie their scarves (carefully, all the way around the neck and face), and their accepting attitude towards polygyny and dowry.

This discourse built around the two ways of being a Muslim (woman), which are often believed to be antithetical to each other, is a reflection of the larger issues discussed above, namely, Tatars' struggle over the role and type of religion that should define their future and identity. Furthermore, as Sabirova's (2006) and Ibrahimasic's (2012) studies among practicing Muslim women in Moscow and Bosnia illustrate, such division of Muslim (female) piety on "traditional," or "conventional" and "new," or "pious" is not uncommon among those communities of Muslims that are undergoing a religious revival.

In actuality, Muslim Tatar women experience and practice their faith vis-à-vis recent Islamic revival in a multitude of ways. Drawing on the ways Bosnian Muslim women identify themselves, one analytical way that Ibrahimasic (2012) proposes to capture this variety is through the notion of “a broad, albeit imperfect continuum that ranges from deeply religious to intensely secular” (p. 12-13). The notion of a continuum of piety may be useful in describing the multiple degrees of piety as a result of a Muslim revival. I suggest, however, that it has to be treated with caution. If such a continuum is built around the popular discourse of what Muslim (female) piety is or should be, its polar opposites, such as “deeply atheist” and “strictly devout, as exemplified in Salafi Islam” (Ibrahimasic, 2012, p. 13), are not reflective of the ways Muslims experience their piety, but, rather, of popular *representations* of such experiences. As I will illustrate throughout this dissertation, particularly in chapters 7 and 8, the ways Tatar women experience piety in the context of the recent Muslim revival are humanly complex and informed by the intricate historical legacy of the Volga Tatars within the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the post-Soviet Russian state.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **DATA AND METHODS**

#### **Fieldsites and Data Collection**

I collected data for this dissertation in Tatarstan, primarily in Kazan, over a total period of thirteen months (June-July 2006; August-September 2008; August 2009-April 2010). I chose to conduct my research in Kazan for several reasons. As Tatarstan's capital, Kazan has been a center of Tatars' ethnic and religious revival. Kazan's population—53% Tatar, 40% Russian—is the result of centuries long, but incomplete, Russian assimilation policies. Finally, as one of Russia's higher education centers, Kazan hosts students from all over Tatarstan and Russia, making it possible for me to interview practicing Muslim Tatar women from outside Kazan.

My first research trip to Kazan took place in the summer of 2006, when I attended the Second Tatar Youth Forum in Kazan, a Tatarstan government-sponsored cultural event bringing together ethnic Tatar youths from around the world. The forum provided a unique opportunity for informal observation and initial contact with Tatar youth, intelligentsia, and public officials. It also provided an impetus for narrowing my focus to practicing Muslim Tatar women for reasons mentioned above.

I made my second research trip to Kazan in the summer of 2008 to make arrangements and begin collecting data. Because I wanted to spend time with and talk to observant Muslim women, I narrowed down my main research sites to mosques and Islamic educational institutions where I had hoped to find them. While it may not be possible to speak of a Tatar mosque movement similar to the one Mahmood (2005) examined in her ethnography, several of Kazan's 38 mosques proved key sites for my

research. Practicing Muslim Tatars often perform one of the five daily prayers at mosques on the way to or from work or during a lunch break. In accordance with *Sunnah*, men try to perform Friday prayers in mosques, which have been consistently collecting more crowds on Fridays. (Practicing women come to mosques on Fridays in order to listen to the weekly sermon performed on Fridays). Non-practicing Tatars who observe only events that mark a life cycle come to mosques to perform certain Islamic rituals, such as *nikakh* [Tatar/Arabic], the Muslim marriage, or *isem kushu* [Tatar], the name-giving ceremony for a newborn. As such, mosques serve as religious centers where one can meet Tatars with various degrees of religiosity.

Moreover, as centers of informal religious education, many mosques provide free regular lessons. I met many Tatar women taking advantage of these learning sessions. Because lessons vary in difficulty, they were an opportunity to meet women interested in Islam but exhibiting various degrees of religiosity and Islamic knowledge. Finally, these sessions, partly due to gender segregation, provide women with an opportunity to ask questions, initiate discussions, and socialize in a safe space—an environment that was particularly conducive for meeting women, establishing rapport with them, and conducting interviews and focus groups.

During this trip, I also gained access to and conducted limited observations and interviews at two Islamic higher educational institutions—the Russian Islamic University (RIU) and the Mukhammadiia *medrese*. I chose these institutions because of their positive reputation and popularity among many Tatars and other Russian Muslims and because they represented two different kinds of Islamic schools available in Russia today. Founded in 1998, the Russian Islamic University is endorsed and indirectly supported

(through grants) by the Republic of Tatarstan (among other Tatarstan government entities). It offers degrees in both secular (such as theology) and religious disciplines and is believed to endorse a traditional for Tatars Hanafi school of law in Sunni Islam. For example, its website states that Hanafi is the dominant religious school adopted by the university. The Mukhammadiia *medrese* was originally founded in 1881 by the prominent Tatar religious leader Galimjan Barudi, but was closed in 1918, re-opening again in 1993.<sup>69</sup> The *medrese* operates on donations and certifies its graduates for service in Muslim parishes by providing religious education. Because both institutions admit female students from all over Tatarstan, Russia, and Central Asia, they provided fruitful sites for meeting Muslim women from all walks of life.<sup>70</sup> To gain access to the Russian Islamic University and the Mukhammadiia *medrese* for this and another upcoming research trip, I approached rectors and vice-rectors at both institutions and introduced my research to them, asking for permission to observe and interview students, to sit in classes, and to attend campus events, and I was granted access to both institutions.

By the end of the second research trip, I established rapport with prominent Muslim women activists and attended public events they organized. I began conducting observations and interviews at Kazan's mosques and the two Muslim educational institutions. I utilized social networks and approached Muslim women in public places to establish contacts and do interviews. During the trip, I also conducted preliminary

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<sup>69</sup> The *medrese* was re-opened thanks to, in great part, the efforts of the local Tatar sovereignty movement activists who demanded that the *medrese* not only open its doors on paper, but that the original building be returned to the *medrese* (it had been occupied by a local business). Taskira *apa*, the *medrese* teacher and a former sovereignty movement activist whose story I analyze in chapter 8, told me that in their efforts to restore the *medrese* in its original building, the Tatar activists resorted to lying on the tramways that ran in front of it and blocking the traffic. According to her, it was this form of physical protest that eventually resulted in the *medrese*'s reopening its doors where it functions now. Another interviewee, Madina *apa*, also briefly reminisced on the re-opening of the *medrese* in her data segment # 2, chapter 5. For more information on the *medrese*, see Rorlich (1986, p. 93), Medrese (2008).

<sup>70</sup> Many of Muslim women I met were simultaneously enrolled in the Mukhammadiia *medrese* and RIU to be able to get "solid" religious knowledge from the former and a state-certified diploma of higher education from the latter, as they would often explain it to me.



interviews with Muslim officials, Tatar scholars, and public representatives. This research trip yielded over twenty (mostly recorded) interviews and a field notebook.

Upon arrival in Kazan for my third, final and most extensive, data-collection trip (August 2009-April 2010), I re-activated access to the Mukhammadiia *medrese* and the Russian Islamic University and contacted women I had met during previous trips. In a close-knit Tatar society, where social networks and personal introductions matter, it was vital to re-establish rapport with research participants, gatekeepers, and public figures. To recruit new interviewees and to increase my chances of meeting women of all ages and from a diverse socioeconomic background, I chose to attend informal lessons at two mosques in diverse neighborhoods of Kazan. Kol-Shārif, Tatarstan's newest main mosque, is located in the Kazan Kremlin (also home to the Tatarstan's President's Palace and multiple government institutions) and functions not only as a mosque, but also as a museum. My impression was that, having been recently built in the historic downtown and surrounded by expensive residential neighborhoods, Kol-Shārif seemed to be frequented by middle-to-upper-middle class parishioners, government officials, and younger people. The second mosque, Nurulla, is older (dating to ca. 1845) and located in one of Kazan's oldest residential neighborhoods, mostly populated by lower- to middle-class retirees. Located fairly close to Kazan's main train station and a big local market, the Nurulla mosque was also known to welcome Muslim worshipers of diverse backgrounds (such as Shia, for example).

Differences in demographics between the two mosques were not as significant as I had initially thought they would be. In other words, women from diverse backgrounds and all walks of life frequented both mosques. What mattered, however, was the specific

*abıstaylar* [Tat. ‘Tatar female Muslim religious teachers’] who taught those lessons and acted as figures of religious and moral authority at each mosque.<sup>71</sup> The Nurulla mosque hosted a number of *abıstaylar* who were highly respected among Tatar women for their education (most of them were graduates of the Mukhammadiia *medrese*) and life experience because some managed to remain observant Muslims even during the Soviet times and thus were considered the preservers of knowledge. In particular, Rashida *abıstay*, who taught at the Nurulla mosque, was a legendary figure who observed Islam all her life, gave secret religious lessons during the Soviet period and was interrogated and arrested for that, but never gave up her religious practice. Moreover, as her multiple students told me in the course of my fieldwork, they respected Rashida *abıstay* for her charismatic personality, down-to-earth wisdom, oratory skills, softness that veiled enormous character strength, and her ability to suspend moral judgment and listen carefully when people sought advice and guidance from her. One of my interviewees, whose story is analyzed in chapter 7, put it best: “I keep coming to her mosque lessons even after attending the Mukhammadiia *medrese* because no one can teach as close to the realities of the real life as she can.”

In addition to sitting in classes at the Kazan Mukhammadiia *medrese* and the Russian Islamic University and attending informal mosque lessons at the Nurulla and Kol-Shārif mosques, I participated in informal and formal activities, such as fast-breaking dinners and tea gatherings in private and public spaces. I utilized a number of tactics to solicit interviewees. I met seventy percent of my interviewees at local mosques, *medreses*, or the Russian Islamic University. In about twenty percent of all of my

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<sup>71</sup> The Kol-Shārif mosque was also frequented by younger Muslims who were attracted to and regularly attended Friday sermons given by Ramil İunusov, its chief imam at the time.

interviews, I relied on previously established connections, asked group leaders or teachers to introduce me to their students, and received suggestions to interview a particular woman because her personality or story were deemed worthy by the recommender. Finally, relying on physical manifestations of Muslim piety, such as the headscarf and modest dress, I sometimes approached women with a request for an interview at a bus stop, a store, a library, and other public places. Those interviews accounted for about ten percent of data.

I usually interviewed women right where I met them (such as the Russian Islamic University, the Mukhammadiia *medrese*, or a particular mosque). On a few occasions, I interviewed women at my rental apartment, at a cafeteria, or at their home. I usually let the interviewee suggest a place for us to have a conversation and would honor their preference unless a scheduling conflict would prevent me from doing so. I also conducted participant observation and interviews among members of the Tatar Cultural Club “*Shäriq*” [Tat. ‘East’]. Meeting and interviewing Tatars at this secular-oriented,<sup>72</sup> but primarily Tatar speaking, venue helped me understand relationships between Islamic and Tatar-ethnic loyalties.

While I had developed a detailed questionnaire (see appendix A), after about a month in the field, I realized that a better strategy would be to use it as a general reference, letting women share their stories in the manner that they chose. In addition to using a tape recorder to conduct interviews, I also made notes about recurring/central

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<sup>72</sup> While the main goal of the “*Shäriq*” club was to support the Tatar language and culture among younger Tatars, its meetings were not completely devoid of religious elements. For example, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, female club members observed modest clothing by donning headscarves. Some women donned them for the duration of the meetings only, while others wore headscarves permanently. Club meetings during Ramadan were also held with snacks and tea, so that guests and club members who observed the fast could break the fast on time. During my visits to the club, I also observed some club members and guests perform the ritual prayer if its time coincided with the time of the meetings, which took place in the evening. This is despite the fact that in my interviews with them some members of the club claimed to be non-practicing Muslims or claimed to observe a different religion altogether.

themes in a narrative, creating a roadmap of an interview. My data collection process resulted in thirty in-depth interviews (ranging anywhere from two to nine<sup>73</sup> hours of tape time) and forty brief personal interviews (ranging from 15 minutes to an hour of tape time), resulting in roughly 170 hours of tape. My fieldwork also yielded interviews with non-practicing Tatar women (approximately 20 hours of tape)<sup>74</sup>, one semester's worth of the "Women in Islam" class sessions at the Mukhammadiia *medrese*, which I attended and recorded (approximately 20 hours of tape), informal mosque lessons at Kazan's Nurulla and Kol-Shārif mosque (approximately 90 hours of tape), informal "tea" gatherings organized by women at the mosques (approximately 20 hours of tape), focus group and random discussions of issues related to Islam (25 hours of tape), recordings of public Muslim events (approximately 15 hours of tape), and interviews with public officials, including Muslim clergy (approximately ten hours).

### Coming to Piety Stories

A larger question underlying my research on Tatar women's interest in Muslim piety was why women turn to Islam as a way of life despite potential challenges associated with a Muslim life-style in a secular state. These challenges range from observing one's daily needs, such as dietary requirements<sup>75</sup> or performance of the five

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<sup>73</sup> I met and talked with some of the interviewees on multiple occasions.

<sup>74</sup> None of those interviews made it into the dissertation as a subject of an individual analysis; however, I drew on them to create a continuum of beliefs and perceptions about faith present in Tatarstan today.

<sup>75</sup> In simplified terms, no pork or alcohol is allowed. Cattle and poultry must be slaughtered in accordance with a certain ritual for the meat to be considered "halal," or appropriate for consumption in accordance with the Muslim normative law. Some women I interviewed shared that they stopped eating out because of difficulty finding dining establishments that would meet their religious dietary requirements. While the number of Muslim-oriented restaurants has been growing in Kazan, they are still few and far-between outside Tatarstan's capital. Furthermore, some women reported that they reduced their socialization with friends who did not take into consideration such dietary requirements because going out with them meant not only having to attend dining establishments that carried alcohol and pork, but sometimes sitting at a table where those products were served. Practicing Muslim Tatar women who had children in school or kindergarten also reported difficulties associated with ensuring that their children were served proper food.

daily prayers,<sup>76</sup> to issues that are politicized to the point of being presented as disruptive to the established social order, such as the hijab.<sup>77</sup> One way to get at the answer was for me to ask pious Tatar women that question directly. Typically, I used the question to begin my one-on-one interviews, and I often received a narrative, or a piety story, in response.<sup>78</sup> I further observed that sometimes interviewees began their narrative before I had a chance to ask them anything, by saying: “*O chem Vy khotite sprosit’? Kak ia prishla v islam?*” [Ru. ‘What would you like to ask about? How I came to Islam?’]. My affirmative response to the question often resulted in a story about a woman’s path to Muslim piety. The phrase “*priiti v islam*” [Ru. ‘to come to Islam’] or variations thereof,<sup>79</sup> thus, referred to a culturally shared communicative practice of sharing one’s path to Islam and often marked the beginning of a piety story.

Moreover, in the course of their narratives, some women talked about sharing their stories with other women, which alerted me to the fact that sharing a story about one’s path to Islam was a commonly shared cultural practice, a ritual of sorts. Finally, as

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<sup>76</sup> Reported difficulties associated with performance of the five daily prayers ranged from time constraints at work or school to inability to perform the mandatory cleansing ritual before the prayer (and thus inability to perform the prayer) due to absence of public bathrooms in working order. As a result, many women shared that, in part as a solution to this particular problem, they started planning their daily activities around prayer times.

<sup>77</sup> In simplified terms, a Muslim woman’s covering also referred to as a veil or headscarf. Modest clothing for men at a minimum presupposes coverage of the body from waist down, and for women – the entire body except for the face, hands, and feet. While certain attributes of men’s appearance, such as a beard, may also be politicized (as I discussed in chapter 8), it is the headscarf that has been politicized as a threat to the established (secular) social order. In addition to the passport pictures case that I discussed in chapter 2 on Tatars’ historical background, approximately ten women I interviewed described difficulties associated with their ability to openly wear the headscarf in public (at school or at work). At least one of my interviewees (at the time of fieldwork) reported removing the headscarf upon a request from her employer, a state public office. Recent controversies in the Stavropol *krai* [Ru. ‘region’] and Tatarstan associated with banning of the headscarves in public schools (at the local level) further illustrate the politicization of the issue, with real consequences for observant Muslim women. For more information on these cases, see footnote 53.

<sup>78</sup> My approach was similar to a biographical-narrative interview, which is solicited by an opening question, usually followed by life story (Rosenthal, 1993).

<sup>79</sup> Referring to a similar phenomenon, Sabirova (2006) uses the phrase “*obrashchenie k islamu*” [Ru. ‘turning to Islam’]. She points to the difference in meaning between the phrases “*obrashchenie k islamu*” [Ru. ‘turning to Islam’] and “*obrashchenie v islam*” [Ru. ‘turning in Islam’], where the latter meaning presupposes the notion of conversion (as in change of religion) from a religion to Islam. In my experience, the most widely used phrase was “*priiti k islamu*” [Ru. ‘to come to Islam’], which, as I suggest, refers to a woman’s stepping on the path to Muslim piety. Furthermore, other phrases were used to mark such religious experience. As one data segment in this chapter illustrates, for example, one Tatar woman marked her commitment to Muslim piety by referring to it as “*priniat’ islam*” [Ru. ‘to accept Islam’]. Later in the chapter, I discuss an older woman’s objection to the use of the phrase “to come to Islam” (or a variation thereof) on the grounds that it denies the presence of faith in her life before she became a practicing Muslim.

I spent more time among practicing Muslim women—at a mosque, in the *medrese*, in a private home, or at a social event—I observed that story-sharing, in one form or another, happened often and spontaneously, but almost always in a religious context and in the process of meeting a new person/new people and introducing people who have not met before, by asking “*Kak ty prishla v islam?*” [Ru. ‘How did you come to Islam?’] or “*Kak davno ty v islame?*” [Ru. ‘How long have you been in Islam?’] or a close variation.

Once I realized that my initial interview questions often yielded an entire (piety) story, I treated them only as a general guide and solicited such stories within the discursive conventions typical for them, as chapter 4 will illustrate (although in this chapter I refer to them as “interviews”). When it was possible and beneficial for my research, I attended co-ed events and also interviewed male figures (usually religious and political experts). While I initially relied on participant observation and interviews as my two primary research tools, my status as both a “native” and a researcher/observer complicated my positioning and what was expected of me and sometimes turned me into a full participant.

### **Data Selection and Analysis**

The amount of data I collected, while, on the one hand provided me with enough material to write a dissertation, on the other, presented me with the daunting task of deciding which narratives to include in it. While the forty brief personal interviews and interviews with non-observant Tatar women contributed to my understanding of beliefs and perceptions about faith present in Tatarstan today, I at the outset limited my sample of data to the thirty in-depth interviews. To sort through those in-depth interviews, I drew

on key features of “life stories” (Linde, 1993) and conversion narratives (Snow and Machalek 1984; Hovi 2004) to make a repertoire of discursive elements that would be present in a piety story. In particular, I looked for such elements as (a) reportability (Linde 1993) that enables the narrator to tell and retell the story over a long period of time, (b) construction of narrative in accordance with the “before and after” pattern that indicated a change in one’s life (Hovi 2004), (c) biographical reconstruction (Snow & Machalek, 1984) whereby the narrator re-constructs the past vis-a-vis the new world view (such as Islam), and (d) adoption of a master attribution scheme (Snow & Machalek, 1984), or the narrator’s tendency to attribute life’s events to a single cause. I then relied on my interview notes and partial listening of the data to narrow down my collection of interviews to those that had the most of those features, twenty of the thirty in-depth interviews.

Even though I used certain features of life stories and conversion narratives to guide me through this initial data selection process, I tried to avoid imposing pre-set categories on the data. Rather, at that stage of the data selection, I looked for recurring themes, in accordance with open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). In the next step of data selection, I employed *in vivo* coding, the process of utilizing “terms used by the social actors themselves” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 220). During this process, I logged the twenty interviews I had selected in the previous stage, which involved making comments about the data and generated initial data write-ups, description, and analyses.

The final stage of data selection involved transcribing and translating instances of data<sup>80</sup> that I identified as most compelling about a certain phenomenon or experience. In some cases an experience was shared by other women and thus was, to an extent,

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<sup>80</sup> I performed all data transcription and translation.

representative. In other cases, an individual woman's experience did not easily fit into a certain category, but still contributed valuable insights towards better understanding of a phenomenon. Making an argument for examining culture at the level of individual lives, Okely observes that "'cracks of resistance' to dominant ideologies [. . .] are often more visible when we look at the lives of and listen to the stories of unusual individuals" (as cited in Flueckiger, 2006, p. 24). Sharing in that vision, I did not dismiss women whose stories, narrative styles, or personalities came across as "unusual," but treated them as case studies that provided unique opportunities for understanding things that otherwise would have "fallen through the cracks."

To sum up, this ethnographic project, with an emphasis on narrative, was designed with the purpose of focusing on individual women's experiences. Unlike sociological studies, for example, that tend to focus on groups as units of analysis, assuming social coherence and transferability of experience across the entire group, the purpose of this project was to look at individual actors and their personal experiences vis-à-vis the socio-historic realities that they were part of. As such, the individual women's stories and their analysis are not meant to give the reader a comprehensive account of the recent Muslim revival in Tatarstan. Rather, I suggest that these individual stories, as a form of a communicative resource available to women, "offer different solutions to the problem of establishing and sustaining a particular version of the social world [and identity]—with its assumptions about knowledge and power, access and denial, continuity and change—without denying the possibility of other versions, with their orders and power relations" (Duranti, 1997, p. 330). As such, these stories can contribute



to a better understanding of some ongoing processes and discourses related to the role of Islam in Tatars' quest for identity and the role of women in such a quest.

### **Discourse Analysis**

I employ discourse analysis as the main analytical tool in my examination of practicing Muslim Tatar women's piety stories. As mentioned above, I draw on Stromberg's (1993) notion of identity as a style of doing things, which places the focus of analysis on the style of the women's narratives. Such an approach calls for attention to multilevel linguistic practices—interplay of ideas, narrative viewpoints, speech units—that the narrator uses to enact personal experience in terms of a canonical language (p. 34). To conduct this multidimensional discourse analysis effectively, I utilize the concept of “a life story” (Linde, 1993). Linde (1993) defines life story as a unified discourse unit “that moves from the level of the individual construction of sentences, through the form of narratives and the social negotiation of narratives, up to the social level of belief systems and their history, and finally to their effect on the construction of narratives” (p. 3). Therefore, as a unit of analysis, a life story goes beyond a single word, utterance, conversational turn, or a sentence, and includes all of the stories and associated discourse units<sup>81</sup> that constitute a single life story (p. 21), thus allowing for richness and fullness of data. At the same time, the multidimensional structure of a life story allows for a possibility of an in-depth analysis of its smaller elements, without getting lost in the data. Ultimately, my choice of a life story as a unit of analysis was dictated by the fact that it productively accommodates Muslim Tatar women's piety stories, identity-oriented narratives about their paths to Muslim piety.

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<sup>81</sup> Linde (1993) identifies them as “explanations and chronicles” (p. 21).

Ochs and Capps (2001) observe that at the heart of a narrative is “telling a story *with* another” as opposed to “telling a story *to* another” (p. 2). As I illustrate in the next chapter, sharing a piety story is, in a way, telling a story with another because the audience’s feedback contributes to the way the narrative is delivered. In other words, storytelling presupposes a strong performative component. From that perspective, then, a narrative is a contextually and situationally grounded mode of symbolic communicative action. It is “*a situated performance*” (Brockmeier and Carbaugh, 2001, p. 13) that is partially dependent on the situational context. Therefore, in my analysis of the piety stories, I account for the immediate context in which story sharing takes place and that contributes to the situated performance of the narrative. Finally, following Bucholtz (2005) observation that “for language and gender research, the most prominent issues in discourse analysis are the nature of context, the role of agency versus dominant forms of power, and the analytic stance of the researcher” (p. 63), I locate the immediate situational context in which piety stories take place within the larger socio-historical milieu. In my analysis of the piety stories, therefore, I regularly shift between analyses of the micro and macro dimensions of discourse, for example, between the details of a given subject’s story and aspects of the larger historical context, such as the fall of the Soviet Union, that inform the stories.

### **Transcription and Translation of Narratives**

The narratives provided in this dissertation usually took place in a mix of Russian and Tatar,<sup>82</sup> with frequent insertions of Arabic, a sign of both the Tatars’ Islamic revival

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<sup>82</sup> Only one narrative took place exclusively in Tatar, and I translated it into English myself. I identify the instance in the dissertation.

and a speaker's personal piety.<sup>83</sup> As these shifts in language can serve as important markers of identity and piety, I tried to preserve the instances of code-switching from Russian to Tatar and Arabic as much as I could (by using the Latin alphabet to transliterate them for easier comprehension), which resulted in relatively complicated transcripts. If a word in Russian carried a specific cultural meaning that its English equivalent could not communicate, I also preserved the Russian in the English transcript. If a word in a transcript carried a cultural meaning that could not be represented with a short gloss, I explained it in a footnote and in my analysis of the transcript. Finally, as a result of the recent Muslim revival, both Tatar and Russian are experiencing an influx of religious Arabic terms. These terms are recent borrowings into the Russian language. While contemporary Tatar language<sup>84</sup> had contained some of these terms, new Arabic terms are also becoming part of it. Therefore, throughout her narrative, a practicing Muslim Tatar woman may use older Arabic (and Farsi) borrowings that had become part of the Tatar language, as well as newer Arabic borrowings that are part of the recent revival. The latter are more likely to be used by a younger generation of practicing Muslims who are not "wedded" to the Tatar language and are more likely to follow Arabic or Russian, rather than Tatar, pronunciation. This variability is a reflection of the competing discourses of Islam and identity in the current Muslim revival. If a certain

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<sup>83</sup> In *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories*, Abu-Lughod (2008) talks about the frequent use of religious terms (in Arabic) by her interlocutors and her decision to omit them.

<sup>84</sup> I refer to the Tatar language based on Cyrillic, which was introduced in 1939. Prior to 1939, Tatar was based on an Arabic alphabet, which was later (in 1928) replaced with the Latin script. For a historical account of the change of alphabets, see Rorlich (1986, pp. 150-152). As Faller (2011) observes, illumination of the Arabic and later Latin alphabets were political, as well as cultural moves, and resulted in the loss of literacy (and thus historical and cultural legacy) by some generations and in fragmentation of knowledge once shared by Turkic-speaking people (p. 117-118). Faller (2011) refers to the Soviet alphabet reform as "Soviet colonialism" (p. 117). A recent (1999) attempt by the Tatarstan's government to switch the Tatar language to a Latin-based alphabet was defeated by the Duma's 2002 law that prohibited use of non-Cyrillic alphabet in the Russian Federation. In 2004, the Tatarstan's government took the case to the Russian Constitutional Court, where the case was thrown out.

pronunciation of an Arabic term was crucial to my data, I identified it in either the transcript or data analysis.

I transcribed and translated all narratives into English myself, occasionally consulting with more proficient Tatar/Arabic speakers.<sup>85</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, the majority of stories analyzed in this dissertation were told in Russian with an occasional mix of Tatar and Arabic. Interview transcription conventions, which I used to present excerpts of data, are presented in an appendix B. In the analysis sections of the dissertation (not in the excerpts of data), I present culturally meaningful Arabic/Tatar/Russian words in italics, immediately following them in square brackets with an abbreviated language marker (“Tat.” for Tatar, “Ru.” for Russian, and “Ar.” for Arabic) and English translation in single quotation marks. For example:

As Muslims, we have to perform *namaz* [Tat. ‘Muslim ritual prayer’] five times a day.

I thought I was a mere *baba* [Ru. ‘woman’].

I would not have come to Islam had it not been for *Allah subhana wa ta’ala* [Ar. ‘God, May He be Glorified and Exalted’].

Finally, due to the fact that currently there is no universally agreed upon Tatar to English transliteration system, in this dissertation I utilized Tatar transliteration conventions offered by Suzanne Wertheim (2003a) in her dissertation *Linguistic Purism, Language Shift, and Contact-induced Change in Tatar* (p. 355). Transliteration conventions for both Tatar and Russian are presented in an appendix C. I provide a glossary of Arabic, Tatar, and Russian words used throughout the dissertation at the end

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<sup>85</sup> In those instances, a translation would be made into Russian first, with my consequent translation into English.

of the manuscript, right after the bibliography. I take responsibility for any errors or inconsistency associated with language use.

### **Community Member as Researcher**

While my fieldwork was productive and yielded more data than I could use in my analysis (as suggested above, not all stories made it into the dissertation), there are methodological issues that require further commentary that have little to do with “hours of data recorded” or “discourse analytic concepts.” In one way or another, they have to do with my own identity as both a community member and a U.S.-trained researcher, which inform my theoretical stance and positioning.

### **Language**

As an ethnic Tatar, I was required to take Tatar classes throughout elementary and middle school in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Those classes, however, were no more than a Soviet-era curriculum formality and amounted to one hour of Tatar per week.<sup>86</sup> While I have no doubt that my Tatar language teacher loved her native tongue, her primary method of teaching was to sing to her students and make us sing along. I have to confess that I did not share my teacher’s passion for Tatar music at the time.<sup>87</sup> An “A” student all around, I rarely succeeded in her class, and I was happy when I no longer was required to take Tatar toward the end of middle school and in high school.

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<sup>86</sup> I also discuss the Soviet language policies in chapter 2 on Tatarstan’s history.

<sup>87</sup> In her chapter on *mong*—Tatar melancholy songs that draw on and elicit the feelings of grief-sorrow—Faller (2011) describes an episode where, during a special tea-drinking session organized for the researcher to tell her about and sing Tatar music, a Tatar teacher scolded her Tatar students for not knowing any *mongful* songs. The teacher was concerned about and disappointed with the younger generation’s lack of knowledge on *mong* and proceeded to sing one herself (p. 263). It is quite possible that my Tatar teacher sang *mong* during our Tatar lessons. The only memory I have about those songs is on an emotional level: they made me feel sad (because of the slow tempo) and bored (because I did not understand the lyrics).

Growing up in a Russian-majority industrial town of Zelenodolsk, just west of Kazan, my sources of learning Tatar were limited to occasional interaction in Tatar at home. My parents, both ethnic Tatars, were born in Kazakhstan, then a Soviet Republic, in the early 1940s, and their knowledge of the language was limited to the conversational level and came from their immediate family. Considering the fact that both of them lost all of their parents and grandparents by the age of 25, their limited knowledge of Tatar was not unexpected. As in many Tatar families where parents were born and grew up under the Soviet regime, my parents usually spoke Tatar only when they wanted to hide something from my sister and me. My mother's command of the language was better than that of my father. To her credit, every now and then she would declare a "Tatar only" policy in our home, but it would usually take only five minutes before everyone switched back to Russian again.

Some ethnic Tatars might call me a "*mankurt*,"<sup>88</sup> a derogatory term for Tatars who did not speak the language and showed little interest in learning it. While my identification as a "*mankurt*" was (and is still) deeply personal and internalized—meaning that I had perceived my lack of skills and interest in the Tatar language as my *personal* problem—American anthropologist's Helen Faller's (2011) discussion of how Tatars identify their language skills illustrates that it is a *social* problem. Faller (2011)

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<sup>88</sup> The word "*mankurt*" comes from the Soviet era Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov's novel *I dol'she veka dlitsia den'* [Ru. *The Day Lasts Longer than a Hundred Years*], whose theme is the fate of the people who forget their native land, language, and history. According to a legend narrated in the novel, "*mankurt*" is a slave whose memory is erased by wrapping the slave's shaved skull with piece of freshly slaughtered camel's skin. The term "*mankurt*" became popular in the post-Soviet in relation to people who are considered indifferent to their motherland, native language and culture. For example, in response to a journalist's question about his opinion of the term "Russian-speaking Tatars" or "*Mankurts*," the chair of the World Tatar Congress Renat Zakirov suggested: "They are the reality of contemporary life. Many Tatars became 'Mankurts' against their own will. It may be seen as a result of the assimilation of our people over the centuries. It was particularly prominent during the Soviet time. We have to work with this group of our compatriots, of course, especially because they continue to consider themselves Tatars" (Sultan, 2006). While I have never been called "*mankurt*" in my face, based on my familiarity of the use of the term, I would not be surprised if I was called "*mankurt*" behind my back.

states: “Tatars generally say that ‘to know Tatar’ is to be fully conversant in Tatar quotidian speech and literary language . . . . Bilingualism often becomes a topic of ideological discourses about linguistic purism, as many Tatar-speakers say they are not fully bilingual because they do not know Tatar literary language, only everyday speech” (p. 14).

My serious interest in studying the Tatar language began in graduate school in the U.S. in preparation for my dissertation research, and I then began a self-study of Tatar that is on-going to this day. My knowledge of Tatar at the time of my field research was good enough to make introductions and carry an informal conversation. It was not good enough to carry on in-depth political or religious discussion. Furthermore, my anxiety about my Tatar proficiency was exacerbated by my conviction that, as a Tatar born and raised in Tatarstan, I would be expected to deliver perfect Tatar and no mistakes would be tolerated.<sup>89</sup> As a result, if my interlocutors felt comfortable communicating in Russian, I would initiate my interaction in Tatar and eventually switch to Russian. I am aware of the impact that language use may have had on such interactions. I am thankful to my Tatar interlocutors for accommodating to my fears and weaknesses and encouraging me to continue learning the language. If an interaction took place in Tatar, I made sure to clarify concepts that I felt unsure about. Having the digital recorder and being able to go back and listen to conversations multiple times also helped with potential language comprehension and translation problems.

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<sup>89</sup> My anxiety was not completely ungrounded. Wertheim (2003a, 2003b) and Faller (2011) discuss some Tatars’ efforts to purify the language by refusing to accommodate to non-speakers of Tatar or speakers of poor Tatar.

## **Translation**

Another challenge in my data analysis was my translation of the material. As Duranti (1997) observes, translation “implies a long series of interpretations and decisions that are rarely made apparent in the final product” (p. 154). During the translation process, I constantly had to choose among imperfect options to keep both the form and meaning of discourse as close to the original as possible. Due to the very different nature (and structure) of English, Tatar, Russian (and Arabic), it is impossible to preserve both form and meaning fully in the translations. My own level of mastery of these languages also limited my translation although I did consult native speakers of each of the languages.

Duranti (1997) further clarifies that “the activity of translating is intimately related to ethnography, to the contextualization of words within the activity and the larger sociopolitical and cultural systems in which their speakers participate” (p. 154). This means that the micro-level literal translation that I conducted intertwined with my role as an ethnographer, which included being a data collector, a (cultural) interpreter, and writer of the final product. What made this role complicated was my position as both the researcher and a “native” in the data analysis and write-up stages of this project.

## **Negotiating ethnographic worlds**

While the older generation of women were welcoming to me and admired my Western education and what they perceived as my interest in “Islam” (both of which their own children often lacked, according to the women), the younger generation often challenged my intentions and religiosity during my fieldwork by questioning me about



my life and never hesitating to correct me when they noticed lapses in my judgment or piety. As a U.S.-based researcher married to an American (and thus a non-Muslim) and as an individual whose religious knowledge and practices were often lacking, I was also an outsider.<sup>90</sup> My disappointment at my situational outsider status partly came from my assumption that, as a Tatar woman born, raised, and educated in Tatarstan (whose entire family still resides there), I was a “native.” I thought I would have enough cultural and religious capital to stand on equal footing, particularly with younger women to whom I was closer in age. I had also assumed that, because I was not a theology student and was not studying “Islam” but rather discursive ways of identity construction by and among these women, I would not be judged so critically on my (sometimes suspect) Muslim religious knowledge.

Commenting on a somewhat similar position in the field when the researcher becomes the interviewee and the one being observed, while the interviewee becomes the interviewer and the observer, Peshkova (2006) argues such “methodological role inverse” “allowed partial subversion of the power differences by allowing sharing the position of authority” (p. 42). In my case, while such role reversal often put me in an uncomfortable spot, it led me to reflexivity<sup>91</sup> and forced me to bracket<sup>92</sup> my initial assumptions and beliefs.

On one level, I had to come up with a strategy to position myself in such a way that would allow me to deal with the immediate effects of my ambiguous positioning and identity. I tried to highlight Muslim and Tatar aspects of my identity in some situations

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<sup>90</sup> Older women were also very curious about my life, but, unlike younger women who were interested in my piety, the older women were interested in more “secular” aspects of my life, especially my life in the U.S.

<sup>91</sup> In this context, reflexivity implies attention to what we do as researchers and how it affects the process and outcome of interaction. For a discussion on reflexivity in ethnographic work, see Davies (1999).

<sup>92</sup> I refer to Edmund Husserl’s notion of the phenomenological reduction that involves suspending the researcher’s assumptions and beliefs. For further reading see Sokolowski (2000).

(particularly when meeting women), and remain an observer (still partially participant) in others. For example, out of respect for my interviewees and places where most interviews took place (the mosques and Muslim educational institutions), I wore a headscarf and dressed modestly, making sure my clothes covered my body leaving only my hands and feet visible. If I found myself in a mosque where a call for one of the five daily prayers was followed by a collective prayer, I participated in the collective prayer, which was considered *Sunnah*, and thus an appropriate thing to do. At other times, during other religious events that could be considered less obligatory for Muslims, I tried to remain an observer.

Neither wearing a headscarf in a religious setting nor participating in a collective prayer was an unfamiliar experience for me but keeping the headscarf on while leaving a mosque was. Growing up in the Soviet Union, I participated in religious gatherings that my mother or other Tatar relatives organized in the privacy of their homes to mark an important life event, such as death of a kin or a marriage engagement. During such gatherings, it was culturally and situationally expected that all women (and girls) don a scarf (even if leaving part of their hair, neck, and chest exposed). It was also expected that all present participate in the collective listening of the Qur'anic *surahs* [Ar. 'verses'] (performed by an older Tatar man or woman) and then hold out the palms of their hands together during *doga* [Tatar], a non-ritual prayer<sup>93</sup> that followed. Addressed directly to God, *doga* was a personal prayer request for health, happiness, and prosperity for those present in the room and their families, as well as for a place in heaven for the deceased. *Doga* was recited by the ceremony leader out-loud and accompanied by frequent collective interjections of "*Amin!*" [Tat. 'Amen!'] from those present, as they slightly

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<sup>93</sup> As opposed to *namaz*, the Muslim ritual five-daily prayer, prescribed in the Qur'an.

rocked back and forth in their seats to the improvisational rhythm of the prayer. Even though the women promptly removed the scarves upon the events' completion, and no one actually performed *namaz*, the Muslim ritual prayer, these events constituted a sacred physical and virtual space where collective worshiping took place. They made the rituals of temporarily donning the scarf and participating in a collective prayer familiar experiences. I was not, however, accustomed to leaving the headscarf on outside such a gathering or outside a mosque, which constituted a new experience for me because it marked me in a very specific way in public: as an observant Muslim woman.

When it came to the interviewing processes, I dealt with ambiguities by reciprocating the degree of openness that I would expect of, or receive from, my interviewees. As a rule, I would not disclose personal information about myself that I would not feel comfortable asking an interviewee, but would share it if the other person shared it with me voluntarily and expected the same in return. The level of trust and power-dynamics between an interviewee and me varied on a case-by case basis: I became friends or acquaintances with some interviewees and maintain contact with them, while I might never again see or speak with others. Ultimately, in my relationship with the interviewees I strived to develop “an emotional empathy” (Marranci, 2008, Kindle Locations 275-276). I came to appreciate and enjoy certain practices (even if for a time), such as dressing in a modest way and using the headscarf to carefully cover my hair and neck. Ethnographers, like ethnographic subjects, cannot be denied their humanity.

In a famous piece, Geertz (1973) suggests that “Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of “construct a reading of”) a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but

written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior” (p. 10).<sup>94</sup> While I take it for what it’s worth—a metaphor—I treat the metaphor that compares doing ethnographic work to reading a “foreign,” “faded” manuscript with caution. Understood from a humanistic view point, our readings of other people’s words, spoken or written, are in a way always foreign and faded, but when applied to the notion of culture, the metaphor reifies a culture. Furthermore, it puts someone like me—a researcher that comes from that culture—in a difficult position of having to experience, interpret, and speak from two different worlds simultaneously.

Five years after Clifford and Marcus’ (1986) edited a collection of essays on “writing culture,” Abu-Lughod (1991) provided a revision to the concept because the approach ignored feminists and “halfies,” people who identify with more than one cultural background, as both groups did not fit neatly into the “self”/“the other” dichotomy. By suggesting to “write against culture,” Abu-Lughod proposed to generate the kind of ethnographic writing—“ethnography of the particular”—that avoided sweeping generalizations and focused on people’s individual experiences that are grounded in local (and) historical contexts. To the best of my ability, I wrote this dissertation in the spirit of Abu-Lughod’s (1991) plea that “we must constantly attend to the positionality of the anthropological self and its representations of others” (pp. 141-142).

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<sup>94</sup> Hoffman (2009) finds treating culture as text problematic because it betrays not only “the literary metaphor, but also the literacy metaphor” (p. 418). She argues: “When these ‘texts’ are written artifacts, the question of access is acute, as questions of power immediately arise, particularly because individuals’ access to literary practices is conditioned by wealth or poverty, geographical location (often a related concern), but also intrafamily relations—as when parents and especially fathers choose which daughters to send to school, and for how long” (p. 418). Hoffman (2009) further probes the culture-as-text approach by analyzing how it is (in)applicable to female Tashelhit Berber-speakers in Taroudant Province of Morocco in their use of oral religious texts.

## CHAPTER 4

### “PIETY STORIES”: MUSLIM TATAR WOMEN’S IDENTITY PERFORMANCE AND TRANSFORMATION THROUGH STORYTELLING

Drawing on research on conversion narratives (Stromberg, 1993) and life stories (Linde 1993), this chapter explores culturally shared premises and social meanings behind the communicative practice of sharing paths to Muslim piety. I argue that soliciting and sharing stories about one’s path to Muslim piety is a communicative way of performing identity and re-affirming one’s commitment to Muslim piety. Depending upon whether the storyteller is able to orient herself toward her audience (through stance-taking), the audience shares in the religious commitment, and community building<sup>95</sup> takes place. Finally, I argue that, in the moment of interaction, the stories provide a discursive way for the speaker to practice being a Muslim and for the audience, a blueprint for becoming one. By doing so, these piety stories serve as a source of agency for both personal and social transformation.

As described in chapter 3 on methodology, piety stories often occurred spontaneously when I asked women how they came to Islam. In addition, in the course of their narratives, some women talked about sharing their stories with other women, which alerted me to the fact that sharing a story about one’s path to Islam was a commonly shared cultural practice, a ritual of sorts. Finally, as I spent more time among practicing Muslim women—at a mosque, in a *medrese*, in a private home, or at a social event—I observed that story-sharing, in one form or another, happened often and spontaneously,

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<sup>95</sup> By community, I refer to both a Muslim community at the local level, such as *māhällä* [Tat. ‘local community’], a group of Muslims attending the same mosque, and the global level such as the *Ummah* [Ar. ‘Muslim community around the world’].

but almost always in a religious context and in the process of meeting a new person/new people and introducing people who have not met before.

In this chapter, I first review concepts from research on conversion narrative (Snow & Machalek, 1983; 1984; Staples & Mauss, 1987; Stromberg, 1993) and life stories (Linde, 1993), suggesting the key role of language in the reflection and constitution of identity, as well as in personal and social transformation. I explain how those notions of language, personhood, and change apply to Muslim Tatar women and their piety stories. I then analyze three different instances of piety stories that occurred spontaneously in the course of my fieldwork and one story that I solicited, all of which point to the importance of piety stories as a culturally meaningful form of communication. In particular, the first data excerpt from an informal religious dinner gathering is an example of how a woman's piety story is used to construct identity, negotiate membership, and build a community. The second segment from a lesson at the local *medrese* demonstrates how piety stories serve as a source for transformation of not only the speaker herself, but also the audience, ultimately resulting in a social change. In my analysis of the third segment of data, I illustrate how the communicative practice of sharing piety stories often results in reciprocation, whereby the speaker, having shared her story, invites other audience members to share their stories or the audience members volunteer to do so, resulting in a role reversal of sorts. Such reciprocation further contributes to identity and membership negotiation and group unity. Finally, the fourth data segment is an example of a piety story shared by an older practicing Muslim Tatar woman who became an observant Muslim later in life. Unlike younger practicing women,

she did not speak about the moment of “conversion,” but positioned her entire life, and not just the years of practicing, as a life-long path toward Muslim piety.

### **Conversion Narratives and Life Stories**

Although research on conversion narratives largely focuses on (Evangelical) Christianity, it provides some useful insights that I draw on in my analysis of the piety stories. Among them are the notions of biographical reconstruction and self-transformation, both of which underline the importance of language in the reflection and constitution of identity. Informed by symbolic interactionism and Mead’s idea of “universe of discourse,” Snow and Machalek (1983) suggest that conversion involves a change in one’s consciousness. They propose the notion of the biographical reconstruction as one of four characteristics of a convert (and his or her new consciousness). Biographical reconstruction, reflected in the language use, refers to the convert’s ability to rhetorically reconstruct the events of the past anew, in accordance with the new “universe of discourse,” new meanings and new perspectives. Building on Snow & Machalek (1983, 1984), Staples and Mauss, (1987) conceptualize conversion not as a change in consciousness (reflected in language), but as “a change in the way a person thinks and feels about his or her self” (p. 137), thus placing the notion of personhood in the center of conversion. Based on that, and drawing on Turner’s (1976) notion of the “real self” (vs. the “spurious self”), they further suggest that conversion can be conceptualized as a change in the “real self,” or self-transformation, “the creation of a new vision of who we *really* believe we are when all our social roles and self-presentations are stripped away” (Staples & Mauss, 1987, p. 137). Finally, and most

importantly, Staples & Mauss (1987) treat language and rhetoric not as a tool to access a convert's consciousness, but as a mechanism for self-transformation, which underlines their functionalist approach to language. In such light, biographical reconstruction is not a "characteristic" of a convert (Snow & Machalek 1983, 1984); rather, it becomes a "method" for self-transformation (Staples & Mauss, 1987, p. 138).

Analyzing conversion stories of Evangelical Christians in the U.S., Stromberg (1993) further advances the idea of language as self-transformation in the context of religious conversion. While his research is based on American born-again Christians, I argue that its major premise—that religious discourse (via conversion narrative) allows for a reconciliation of one's conflicting desires (by linking them to a largely-shared belief system) and thus enables self-transformation (p.29)—is transferrable to the case of practicing Muslim Tatar women today and their piety stories. Drawing on the speech act theory, Stromberg (1993) emphasizes the constitutive function of language, which allows the speaker to do things with words because it not only reflects an appropriate meaning and context, but also creates them in the act of speech. Based on this understanding of language, Stromberg (1993) proposes to think of identity as "ways of doing things," which underlines its interactional nature (p.27). Further, drawing on Rappaport's (1977) notion of ritual, Stromberg (1993) places the performance of conversion narrative in the realm of ritual because, functionally, such narrative aims to connect personal experience with the divine (canonical language) (p. 11). It is the speaker's ability to appropriate the canonical language for metaphorical purposes—to think of his or her personal experience in canonical terms—that ultimately enables the speaker to re-live the transformative conversion experience again and again (in the act of speaking) and which, in turn,



contributes to the experience of self-transformation. From this perspective then, conversion, is not limited to a singular identifiable occurrence (even if the speaker portrays it as such), but is an ongoing process.

While at the heart of Stromberg's (1993) theory of conversion narrative is the canonical language of Evangelical Christianity, his analysis can be extended to other religious contexts, including Islam. This is, in great part, due to Stromberg's analytical definition of canonical language as language that draws "upon the mystical, the infinite, upon that, which has significance beyond the everyday" (p. 62). As such, canonical language is not tied to Evangelical Christianity in any particular analytical way. In my analysis of the piety stories, I draw on Stromberg's research with a few changes that account for a different religious and socio-historical context. As Mahmood (2006) suggests, Muslim piety is grounded in physical (bodily) manifestations that are incumbent on every able Muslim (albeit, with varied degrees of urgency, depending on a particular act and context). Among the daily acts of piety, for example, are the five daily prayers, observance of modest clothing<sup>96</sup> and dietary<sup>97</sup> requirements. Therefore, it is not only the speaker's ability to relay her experiences in the canonical language of Islam that constitutes the performative act of religious commitment and self-transformation (although canonical language is also important). It is the woman's familiarity with the basic acts of Muslim piety and her ability to show her connection to them on a personal level, via narrative, that signifies her commitment to Islam. This is why, following Sabirova (2006) and Garaev (2008), I argue that the physical experiences of taking on the

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<sup>96</sup> In simplified terms, modest clothing for men at a minimum presupposes coverage of the body from waste down, and for women – the entire body except for the face, hands, and, in accordance with some schools Muslim religious thought, feet.

<sup>97</sup> In simplified terms, no pork or alcohol is allowed. Cattle and poultry must be slaughtered in accordance with a certain ritual for the meat to be considered "*halal*," or appropriate for consumption in accordance with the Muslim normative law.

performance of the five daily prayers and donning of the headscarf<sup>98</sup> often become key narrative turning points in Muslim piety stories. These physical acts illustrate the woman's spiritual commitment to Islam and, in a narrative, mark the "before" and "after" life experiences,<sup>99</sup> as my analysis will shortly demonstrate. I further argue that a Muslim Tatar woman's ability to speak about her religious commitment in a piety story goes beyond contributing to her own self-transformation: it provides other practicing women with shared meanings and experiences to draw from, and invites non-practicing women to step onto the road to Muslim piety, thereby effecting a social transformation.

Conversion narratives can be conceptualized as one type of a biographical narrative, or a life story. I particularly draw on Linde's (1993) notion of life story because of its emphasis on the relationship between narrative and belief systems that are not simply expressed in the narrative, but also constitute it. Linde (1993) defines life story as a unified discourse unit "that moves from the level of the individual construction of sentences, through the form of narratives and the social negotiation of narratives, up to the social level of belief systems and their history, and finally to their effect on the construction of narratives" (p. 3). According to Linde, life stories (a) express our sense of self by telling others about what kind of person we are and how we got to be that person, (b) they are a mechanism by which we express to, and negotiate with, others our sense of self, (c) they help us assert and negotiate group membership by way of sharing and following the group's norms, and, finally, (d) they draw on systems of knowledge and belief to create coherence (pp. 3-4). In this chapter, I analyze three different spontaneous

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<sup>98</sup> The formative experience of donning of the headscarf is reflected in special discourse associated with it. In Russian, a commonly used phrase referring to a woman's decision to begin wearing a headscarf is "*odet' platok*" ['одеть платок']. While stylistically incorrect (the verb "*odet*" is a transitive verb, similar to the English verb "to dress" someone or something, and thus requires an object; a more correct way would be to say "*nadet' platok*" ['надеть платок']), the phrase is commonly used to refer to the headscarf experience.

<sup>99</sup> Hovi (2004) and Speelman (2006) also point out to a typical for a conversion narrative "before" and "after" division.

instances in which piety stories took place and one solicited story, all of which point to the importance of piety stories as a culturally meaningful form of communication that serves the four key functions outlined above.

### **Identity Construction, Membership Negotiation, and Community Building**

The first data segment presented below is an example of how a woman's piety story is used to construct identity, negotiate membership, and build a community. As a Muslim Tatar woman named Aygul spontaneously begins narrating her path to Muslim piety, she reveals her religious commitment—and thus religious identity—by relating her personal experience to the kinds of acts (such as the five daily prayers) that, according to her, make one a Muslim and by describing her understanding of the notion of faith. By doing so, she implicitly and explicitly communicates her system of beliefs and thus takes a certain stance, which defines her identity. Other interlocutors' reaction to her stance—in the form of agreement, questioning, or clarification—reveals their identities and constitutes the acts of membership negotiation and community building, if her stance is shared by the other members of the immediate discursive (Muslim) community.

The excerpt is based on my recording of a spontaneous informal conversation that took place during an *Iftar* [Tat.], a fast-breaking dinner during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. I was invited to the dinner by a young (early twenties) practicing Tatar Muslim woman Rufina, whom I had met only a few days earlier. Hosting an *Iftar* and inviting people to an *Iftar*—particularly fasting Muslims—is considered an act of *savab* [Tat.], an act of Muslim piety to be rewarded by God. Originally from a neighboring republic

within Russia,<sup>100</sup> Rufina was a full-time student at one of Kazan's many higher educational institutions. She rented a modest apartment in a remote, working-class neighborhood of Kazan and worked full-time while going to school, which indicated her family's modest status and/or her desire to be financially independent of her parents despite her own limited means. Hosting an *Iftar* involves expenses and work to prepare food, and the fact that Rufina was doing it despite her modest means indicated her high degree of piety.

When I arrived at Rufina's apartment on a warm August evening, there were about eight other young women in the room, and all (myself included) but one were dressed in accordance with what is believed to be the prescribed Muslim dress code for women. All of the women wore clothes that covered their bodies completely, leaving the hands and feet seen. The women wore headscarves that were carefully tied, so that no hair or neck was showing. The clothes varied in style (some were more loose than others) and color. But the clothes indicated that the women carefully dressed in a way that suggested a commitment to Muslim piety that went beyond occasional observances of life-changing events, common among secular Tatars.

After short introductions and small talk—most women had just met one another for the first time at the *Iftar*—women started asking one another about their paths to piety. I realized the importance of the interaction and turned my recorder on, with permission, a few minutes into the conversation when Aygul, a young Tatar woman, was sharing her personal experience on the road to piety. As Aygul was telling her story, I interjected a few questions along the way, as did Chulpan. Chulpan was the only woman

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<sup>100</sup> The Russia Federation consists of 83 federal subjects, 21 of which are at the level of a republic, a nominally autonomous political unit with its own parliament and head (president). For more information on the history of Russia's political subdivisions, see chapter 2 on Tatars' historical background.

in the room whose dress did not match patterns common among pious women in Kazan. Her headscarf was tied in the back, displaying her bangs and neck. The way Chulpan tied her headscarf indicated that she did not wear it on a regular basis and simply put it on temporarily for this special religious occasion, a common practice among non-observant Muslim Tatar women. Two more things made Chulpan stand out from the rest of the group: she wore a pair of pants with no tunic covering her lower body (a preferred way to wear pants for a practicing Muslim woman), and she was older (in her mid-thirties) than the rest of the group. As Aygul was wrapping up one part of her story, Chulpan suddenly asked me what I was recording it for.

Aygul's story, Chulpan's question, and a conversation that followed provide a glimpse into how a piety story—and discussion about piety—serve as culturally specific communicative means for identity, and group membership, negotiation. They also provide a glimpse into Aygul's personal transformation as she stepped on the road to piety and her indirect encouragement for Chulpan to dispel doubts about Chulpan's own Muslim identity (and thus Chulpan's affiliation with the immediate group and the *Ummah*) even though Chulpan was a non-practicing Muslim. The conversation took place in Russian, unless otherwise stated in the transcript. The interaction participants are marked by their first name's initials.<sup>101</sup>

*Iftar dinner at Rufina's apartment - Data segment # 1:*

- A: 1. So, when I just started reciting namaz [Tat. 'formal Muslim prayer'], I...well for a  
 2. while=  
 L: 3. =Do you recite all five namaz?  
 A: 4. Yes. I used to recite only the afternoon one. So, I began reciting only the  
 [  
 L: 5. Really?  
 A: 6. afternoon [namaz]; recited it for about a month, right, and my friend would

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<sup>101</sup> My turns are marked by "L" for "Liliya."

7. always tell me: “You,” he says, “how many namaz do you recite?” I say: “One.”
8. [He says]: “Why? When,” he says, “will you start reciting all five?” ((with a smile))
- Ch: 9. And your friend, was he a Muslim?
- A: 10. Yes. He is the one who taught me everything.<sup>102</sup>
- Ch: 11. Aah.
- A: 12. And I say: “Well- soon,” I say. “Well,” I say, “when I feel,” I say, “that it's time
13. for me to recite, I will begin reciting all five [namaz].” A:::nd, so, once I saw a
14. dream that I am reciting namaz, and they say: It's not,” they say, “enough. You,”
15. they say, “need to recite more” ((laughing)).
- L: 16. Really? Namaz, right?
- A: 17. Yes. And after that, I began reciting all five namaz, immediately, the next day,
18. as soon as I woke up ((laughter)), I started reciting all five namaz
19. because=
- Ch: 20. =And where are you (pl.)<sup>103</sup> recording this?
- A: 21. On your phone?
- L: 22. Well, I am writing a dissertation about Muslim women...a:::nd
- [
- Ch: 23. Aah...well, I am not a Muslim
- L: 24. You are not a Muslim?
- Ch: 25. I am Muslim...sort of
- [
- A: 26. No, every person is a Muslim.
- Ch: 27. Basically, I, I believe that He exists, I:::=
- A: 28. =Well, but sezge isem birdeler [Tat. 'You were given a name'],<sup>104</sup> after all?
- Ch: 29. Yes.
- A: 30. You are already a Muslim, you see? So, in their mother's womb, every, sort of,
31. person, even Russian, who- who- any ethnicity – he<sup>105</sup> is already a Muslim. So,
32. when he is born, right, he is any-, so whatever faith his parents give him, that's
33. what he becomes. But, all of them, originally, are all Muslims. Because, Muslim,
34. how is it translated? A “servant of God”...So, Muslim translates as “a servant of
35. God,” and so that's why all, as a matter of fact, all are Muslim. It's just when they
36. are born, their parents give them a different faith.
- Ch: 37. Well, I have such, such, since I am not dressed=
- L: 38. =Are you a Tatar, Chulpan?
- Ch: 39. Yes. Since I am not dressed like you all. But I sort of believe in my own way in
40. my soul that He exists, right, but I am thinking that I am probably some deficient
41. Muslim

[

<sup>102</sup> In the course of the conversation, it became clear that by “everything” Aygul here refers to her current state of knowledge about Islam.

<sup>103</sup> “You” here indicates a plural, formal form of “you” [“Vy”] in Russian. Such form is used among strangers and as a gesture of respect.

<sup>104</sup> Aygul refers here to the Muslim ritual of name-giving, which loosely can be compared to the ritual of baptizing in Christianity, and is seen by some as making one officially a Muslim.

<sup>105</sup> The use of masculine by Aygul here does not mean her favoring of one gender over the other. Rather, she uses masculine pronouns because the Russian word for “the human being” [*chelovek*] is masculine and calls for masculine pronouns when referring to it.

- A: 42. No:::, this, the most important is to  
 43. have faith in your heart. But the fact that, sort of, you (pl.) don't wear, say, the  
 44. headscarf, you (pl.) don't recite namaz, means that you (pl.) don't observe- Em,  
 [
- Ch: 45. This I can't.
- A: 46. namaz is one of the five pillars of Islam. And you (pl.) simply don't observe it.  
 47. And, sort of, it is, of course, a sin to some extent, right, but you (pl.) don't cease  
 48. to become a Muslim because of it. Even those people, who drink, smoke, well,  
 49. do bad things, they are still Muslims.
- Ch: 50. Is that so?
- A: 51. They simply commit a big sin.  
 [
- Ch: 52. Well, I just heard that a Tatar doesn't mean a Muslim. Muslims are  
 53. only those who accepted Islam=
- A: 54. =Well- yes, a Tatar does not mean a Muslim.  
 [
- Ch: 55. I understood that it's you, you accepted Islam – you are  
 56. Muslims, but I am just some “Tatar from a tramway depo.”<sup>106</sup>
- A: 57. No:::! ((*laughter*)). No:::, a Tatar – yes, there are also Baptized Tatars=
- Ch: 58. =Well, that's actually true ((*in a quiet voice*))=
- A: 59. Yes. But if you (pl.), if you (pl.) in your (pl.) heart-  
 [
- D: 60. And there are also Russian Muslims.
- A: 61. Yes.

Aygul, a recent graduate of a prestigious university and a holder of a secure job, was one of the more active participants of the evening and enthusiastically shared her path to Muslim piety with the rest of the group (in lines 1-19). Aygul's decision to talk about how she started praying—from once a day to five times a day—was not coincidental. Throughout my multiple conversations with, and observations among, practicing Muslim women, I noticed that one's commitment to the five daily prayers indicated a degree of Muslim piety and was often considered an important stepping stone on the road to Muslim piety, usually followed by donning the headscarf. From that standpoint, my own question (line 3) to clarify how many times Aygul prayed was an

<sup>106</sup> Chulpan here actually uses the Russian derogatory idiom “tatarka s tram. Parka” [Ru. ‘татарка с трам. парка’], which literally translates as “a Tatar from a tramway depot” and conveys a derogatory reference to a Tatar as dumb and uneducated.

indirect attempt to identify her degree of piety, and thus some aspects of her religious identity. Throughout my fieldwork, I was asked the question about my prayer routine (in one form or another) multiple times and heard it posed many times, especially in introductory types of situations. As is evident from lines 7 and 8, Aygul's friend who introduced her to the basics of Muslim piety often asked her how many times she prayed. As I suggested earlier following Mahmood (2005), because Muslim piety is grounded in physical rituals, one's commitment to daily Muslim rituals, especially the five daily prayers that are considered one of the five pillars of Islam, serve as indicators of one's piety and religious identity. That is why many piety stories, as in Aygul's case, and discussions that follow often focus on physical manifestation of Muslim piety.

Aygul's story is suddenly interrupted by Chulpan who asked me where I was recording the conversation (line 20). The way Chulpan phrased her question made it unclear whether she meant a recording device (understood so by Aygul, which is evident in her response "On your phone?" (line 21)) or the purpose of my recording of the conversation. Before I began recording the conversation, I had explained the purpose of the recording, so Chulpan's question was most likely about the device. However, my (mis)interpretation of it and my desire to clarify what I was doing led to an interesting discussion. When I reiterated that I was writing a dissertation about Muslim women (line 22), Chulpan jumped in to say that she was not a Muslim (line 23). The interaction that followed provides a glimpse into how Chulpan's identity—and thus her sense of belonging (or not) to the rest of the group—is negotiated.

Having first asserted that she was not a Muslim (line 23), Chulpan clarifies what she meant by that, and thus her stance on religion and, ultimately, her own identity. It



would be socially awkward and inappropriate for a Tatar to voluntarily and publicly declare that he or she is not a Muslim *and* to do so among other Tatars at a Muslim religious gathering, such as an *Iftar*. Despite a growing trend among young practicing Muslim Tatars to differentiate between ethnic and religious aspects of their identity (being a Tatar no longer automatically qualifies one as a Muslim), a centuries-long bond between Tatars' ethnicity and Muslim religion remains recognized by the majority of Tatars. Therefore, a Tatar's assertion that he or she is not a Muslim would first and foremost be interpreted as one's conversion to another religion or one's ultimate absence of faith, and either assumption would put a person in an awkward social standing in the context of an *Iftar*. Neither of these being the case, Chulpan rushed to state that she is indeed a Muslim. What made Chulpan originally deny her religious identity (and even express her own inferior status because of it, as evident in line 56) was the quality of her Muslimness—the fact that she was the only non-practicing Tatar in the presence of the pious Muslim Tatar women, whom she considered “real” Muslims (lines 55-56).

Chulpan proceeds to clarify that she is “sort of” a Muslim (line 25), and that she believes “that He exists” (line 27). In lines 39-41 Chulpan explains why she identified herself as “not” a Muslim or “sort of” a Muslim: “Since I am not dressed like you all...am thinking that I am probably some deficient Muslim,” implying that she was not a practicing Muslim. But a key to Chulpan's complicated identity negotiation dance lies in lines 52-53 and 55-56 when she voices a newly emerging sentiment, especially popular among younger (in their late teens through late twenties) pious Muslim Tatars, that “a Tatar doesn't mean a Muslim” and “Muslims are those who accepted Islam” (lines 52-53). Chulpan's discourse here is an example of double-voicing (Bakhtin, 1981) when she

articulates what other women's perception of her might be. Double-voicing implies the presence of two "voices" within an utterance, specifically when "words are spoken as if they are to be understood as being in quotation marks" (Bailey, 2007, p. 268). Chulpan's discourse indicates that, as an older, non-practicing Tatar, she is likely aware of the newly emerging sentiment that differentiates ethnic and religious components of the Tatar identity, an issue I will address at length in Chapter 8. It further points to a growing role of religion in both the Tatar society and to Tatars' competing notions of their identity.

Chulpan's identity negotiation is successfully resolved with the help of Aygul who does not deny the newly popular sentiment (line 54), but provides an explanation of what it is to be a Muslim in the first place (lines 28; 30-36; 42-44; 46-49) and why Chulpan is a indeed a Muslim. Aygul uses three different arguments to "prove" that Chulpan is a Muslim. On the one hand, she asserts that every person is born a Muslim—"a servant of God"—and unless one's religion has been changed later on, he or she remains a Muslim (lines 30-36). On the other hand, by double-checking in Tatar if Chulpan underwent "*isem kushu*," a Muslim name-giving ceremony performed shortly after one's birth (line 28), Aygul implies that the presence or absence of the ritual qualifies one as a Muslim or not. Finally, in lines 42-43, Aygul asserts that "the most important is to have faith in your heart," after Chulpan admits that she believes (lines 27, 39). All three sentiments are popular among non-practicing Tatars today who use them as "proof" of their Muslim identity.

It is Aygul, a practicing Muslim Tatar, who draws on these sentiments to help Chulpan align herself with the rest of the group and forge Chulpan's sense of belonging

to it. Chulpan herself voices a sentiment common among practicing Tatars that being a Tatar no longer means being a Muslim. I argue that such role reversal, when both a practicing and a non-practicing Muslim Tatar woman draw on and thus acknowledge the other side's sentiments, is a successful communicative strategy for identity and group membership negotiation. To be sure, Aygul does not merely acknowledge Chulpan's Muslimness, thus giving her "a free pass." Aygul explains that the fact that Chulpan does not wear the headscarf and does not recite *namaz*, the five daily prayers, makes her a non-observant Muslim, perhaps even a sinner, but still a Muslim (lines 43-44; 46-49). By doing so, Aygul helps foster a sense of belonging that would allow Chulpan to feel part of the immediate group of women, and by extension—the larger Muslim community, the *ummah*. Moreover during my fieldwork many Muslim women described a sense of belonging to a Muslim community as empowering in the context of post-Soviet search for identities. Based on that, I further argue that Aygul's attempts to make Chulpan feel part of the group could be interpreted as a welcoming gesture to Muslim piety, especially because as a Muslim, even though non-practicing, Chulpan is already half-way there.

Chulpan's identity narrative differs from a typical piety story in the following way: she first denies being a Muslim, then admits to "sort of" being one, then explains why she had originally denied her Muslim identity. The fact that by the end of the interaction Chulpan comes to accept Aygul's arguments as to why she, Chulpan, is a indeed Muslim (line 58) points to a successful resolution of her identity negotiation process, which made her—even if only at a discursive, emotional, and symbolic level—part of the group. Once the conversation was over, the question of Chulpan's piety was never brought up for discussion again. As other women proceeded to a different topic,

Chulpan admitted to Aygul that it would be difficult for her to start observing the daily prayers. In response, Aygul gave Chulpan a booklet she had compiled about the five daily prayers and other introductory material for a beginning practicing Muslim. Aygul encouraged Chulpan to begin reciting one prayer a day, just like Aygul had done at the beginning of her road to piety. “I myself had difficulties at the beginning...when I came to Islam,” said Aygul explaining that her own struggle at the beginning of her road to piety prompted her to put the booklet together to help others. While Aygul was the only woman I met who herself compiled a booklet on the basics of Muslim ritual practices, it was not uncommon among practicing Muslim women to share information about the basic tenets and practices of Islam with non-practicing Muslim Tatars. As I will illustrate in chapter 6, such social practice can be considered an act of *dagvat* [Tat./Ru. ‘call to Islam’], an invitation to Islam. In the context of the *Iftar* dinner, Aygul’s sharing the booklet with Chulpan could be interpreted as her invitation for Chulpan to step onto the road to piety.

Aygul’s piety story followed by Chulpan’s identity narrative are examples of how piety stories and discourses generated by them can function as communicative means of identity expression, group membership negotiation, and community building, particularly when women meet each other for the first time. As described by Linde (1993), narratives serve as “important social resources for creating and maintaining personal identity (p. 98). Piety stories, however, are not limited to introductory types of situations and may occur (a) spontaneously, (b) in a familiar setting, or (c) without explicit solicitation from others, albeit almost always within religious contexts. Ultimately, the interaction around Chulpan’s identity points to a spectrum of Muslim piety observed among Tatars, and also

to the fact that Tatars are aware of such a continuum *and* of discourses associated with various points along the spectrum.

### **Piety Story as a Source of Personal and Social Transformation**

In addition to allowing women to express their identities and negotiate group membership, piety stories can serve as a source for transformation of not only the speaker herself, but also the audience, ultimately resulting in a social change. In the act of narrating a story about her path to Muslim piety, the storyteller connects the sacred religious knowledge and canonical language to her personal experience, thereby reconstructing and reliving the transformative experience of stepping onto the path to Muslim piety. Because the narrative act is also an act of sharing, the deeply personal experience that the storyteller chooses to share becomes public, communal knowledge, available to the audience. In the case of piety stories that are shared in religious contexts, this knowledge encourages other women to step onto a similar path and shows them the road head. Therefore, piety stories serve as a source of inspiration and agency and a model for transformation that go beyond the narrator.

The next data segment illustrates a piety story's potential to move the audience to step onto and stay on the path to Muslim piety by way of personal example. The data segment was recorded at the "Woman in Islam" class at the Mukhammadiia *medrese* (Tatarstan's major Islamic higher educational institution located in its capital Kazan) where I audited the class for one semester in the fall of 2009. "The Woman in Islam" class is one semester long, is taught to sophomore female students, and focuses on a proper role of a Muslim woman in and outside the home. A medrese teacher shared this

piety story with her sophomore female students, all practicing Muslims, during a regular class break. The teacher, a *medrese* graduate herself and an observant Muslim Tatar in her mid-twenties, rarely left the classroom during breaks and often chatted informally with her students, most of whom were in their late teens-early twenties.

This particular data segment is interesting not only because the teacher volunteers to spontaneously share her piety story with her students, whom she knows fairly well from previous classes, but also because of the response the story receives from one student, Olima (O). Olima, of Central Asian origin (not an ethnic Tatar), was born into a family of an imam and lived in Kazan with her family most of her life. I argue that the teacher (T) decides to share her story to bond with her students who are of a younger generation. Many of them, like Olima, were born into observing Muslim families and never had to find their own paths to piety like the teacher and her generation did, having been born into non-observant families during the Soviet period. I further suggest that, by way of her own example, the teacher uses the moment as a teaching opportunity to encourage her students to persevere in their *iman* [Tat./Ar. ‘faith’] and to stay on the path of Muslim piety in spite of difficulties that they may encounter. By doing so, she not only narrates a story of her personal transformation, but also encourages it in her students.

Whereas the teacher is sharing her personal piety experience during a class break, she nonetheless remains an authority figure in the classroom and maintains her authority status by underlining the generational difference between herself and her students at the beginning of the narrative. Most of the courses for full-time (day-time) students at the *medrese*, including “The Woman in Islam” class are lecture-centered, where the teacher takes “center stage” and relays information to her students predominantly in a uni-

directional fashion. This is particularly true for freshmen and sophomore students (those at the beginning stages of their religious education), whose participation in a lecture class is limited to occasional comments or questions. Teachers, most of whom are at least ten years older than their teenage students, remain figures of authority outside lecture halls, which is evident in the formal way students address<sup>107</sup> and interact with their teachers. It is important to note that this kind of formality between teachers and students is not unique to a Muslim formal educational setting, such as a *medrese*, but is characteristic of both traditional secondary schools and higher educational institutions in Russia. Such formality both contributes to and reflects the sense of authority that teachers enjoy.

An important feature of the teacher's narrative is the coherence with which her story is constructed, which contributes to achieving authority. Linde (1993) suggests that if the narrator wants to communicate herself as a culturally proper person, she has to achieve coherence in her narrative. Coherence is both "a social obligation that must be fulfilled in order for the participants to appear as competent members of their culture" and "a personal demand...to understand our life as coherent, as making sense, as the history of a proper person" (Linde, pp. 16-17). Whereas Linde's notion of a successful—coherent—narrative is culturally predicated, I argue that it is relevant in this particular case. As a figure of authority and a role model, the teacher is obligated to create a coherent story about her path to Muslim piety as a testimony of her commitment to Islam, which would then position her as a proper, competent member of the local Tatar Muslim community. According to Linde (1993, p. 100) such coherence in a life story must be achieved in relation to three major characteristics of the self: continuity of the self

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<sup>107</sup> A typical way students at the *medrese* address their teachers is by using the teacher's first name, followed by an Arabic, gender-specific word for "teacher." For example, a male teacher would be addressed as "Ravil *ustaz* [Ar. 'male teacher']."

(particularly through time); relation of the self to others; and reflexivity of the self (particularly moral evaluation of the self). My analysis illustrates that all three coherence-related characteristics of the self are present throughout the teacher's story below, which contributes to her commitment to Islam, her authority status, and make her appeal to stay on the path to Muslim piety more powerful.

*Informal conversation during a medrese class break - data segment # 2:*

- T: 1. As a matter of fact, recollecting how we were accepting Islam, I remember in our  
2. courtyard, well the town where I was born, [there were] very few Muslims. Well,  
3. one can say there were almost no [women] there in headscarves. I remember  
4. when I began wearing the headscarf, all neighbors, everybody is staring at you.  
5. Old ladies are sitting on the benches, and their head[s] goes like “zing” ((*turns*  
6. *her head, laughs*)). [They say] something like: “Look, a nun<sup>108</sup> is passing by,”  
7. this and that... Then after about a year has gone by....well, patience, of course.  
8. Whenever such moments take place, [you] think, sort of, you recall **ahadith** [Ar.  
[  
O: 9. Uhum  
T: 10. ‘accounts of exemplary sayings/deeds of the Prophet Muhammad’] that [say] if  
11. all the people gather to cause someone harm, they will not be able to cause harm,  
12. right, unless it’s Allah’s will... And so... I remember in a year, [it is] a same usual  
13. day, [you] pass, as always, doorways, and so [you] cross the street, and farther the  
14. same old ladies are sitting ((*with a smile*)), and completely, a year passed by,  
15. [they] talk differently: “Oh, good for you” and “she doesn’t drink or smoke”  
16. and such. And you think: “**Masha’Allah** [Ar. ‘God has willed it’],<sup>109</sup> these are the  
17. same people, and how little time has gone by.” And many do so, and relatives  
18. perceive [you] similarly usually. At first they also say: “**Mujahideen** [Ar. ‘who  
19. struggle for God’].”<sup>110</sup> Or something like “*Shakhidka*” [Ru. ‘suicide bomber’]<sup>111</sup>  
20. and all that and then, later: “**Masha’Allah!**” “Good for you!” yes, that’s the way it  
[  
O: 21. “Good for you”

<sup>108</sup> Meaning a “spinster nun.”

<sup>109</sup> The Arabic phrase is used to express praise to Allah and appreciation for an event or person.

<sup>110</sup> While the teacher here uses the plural form of the original Arabic word “*Mujahid*,” which translates as “the one who struggles on the path to Allah,” the present-day Russian calque of the Arabic word is most likely associated with Soviet military campaign against the Afghan opposition fighters in the late 1970s. Thus, the present-day Russian calque has a negative, derogatory connotation and refers to a Muslim militant, terrorist, or someone who is believed to have radical Muslim views, which is the meaning that the teacher is trying to invoke.

<sup>111</sup> The teacher here refers to the derogatory meaning that the Arabic word “*shaheed*” acquired in present-day Russian. The original Arabic word refers to honor a Muslim who died defending their faith, country, or family. The meaning is not limited to acts of fighting in the military sense, as a woman who dies during childbirth, for example, can also be referred to as “*shaheed*.” The Russian version of the word (“*shakhidka*”), however, usually refers to Muslim female suicide bombers or women who are believed to hold radical Muslim views, which is the meaning that the teacher is trying to invoke.



- T: 22. was. Well, I think it happens practically for everybody this way ((*smiling*  
23. *voice*)). Well, ok, Olima has grown up in a family, right, where, right=  
O: 24. =It's really interesting for me to be listening to all this; [I] would have liked to  
25. go through this ((*laughing*))  
T: 26. No, it's not worth it. ((*laughing*))  
O: 27. Not worth it, then? ((*laughing*))  
T: 28. No, not ((*laughing*))=  
S: 29. =What's...not worth it?  
T: 30. She says: "I would like to go through this, too"  
O: 31. It's just a precious feeling probably.  
[  
T: 32. Well, the feeling, of course, is yes, the headscarf is appreciated,  
[  
O: 33. is appreciated afterwards...  
T: 34. and, of course, [you] look differently at everything=  
O: 35. =I have heard all kinds of stories, at the Nurulla mosque during every single trip  
36. there. A girl was telling a story, and I was in shock ( ), remember, in total shock.  
[  
T: 37. Yes, yes.

The teacher begins her piety story by recalling how she started on her road to Muslim piety. She uses the phrase "*prinimat' islam*" [Ru. 'to be accepting Islam'] to mark off the beginning of her spiritual journey. The use of the progressive verb (line 1) and a later reference to how things were within a year (line 7) emphasizes a process and a sense of continuity through time. I further suggest that by using the plural first person noun "we" in "how we were accepting Islam," the teacher speaks on behalf of her generation of Muslim women, marking the difference between herself and her students who, on average, are ten years her junior, and thus positioning herself in relation to her students in a certain way.

During the time frame the teacher is referring to (the 2000s), the post-Soviet Muslim revival was still closely tied to the ethnic revival, and practicing Muslims (as opposed to non-practicing, symbolic Muslims) were a tiny minority even within historically Muslim ethnic groups such as Tatars. Moreover, the Muslim revival at the

time was limited to Russia's ethnic, historically Muslim regions, such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. An ethnic Tatar herself, the teacher was born and lived outside Tatarstan in a Russian region before she came to Kazan to study at the *medrese*. Therefore, the teacher could also be speaking on behalf of those practicing Muslim women who, at the time, happened to live outside central Russia's historically Muslim regions such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, in a less diverse environment.

The teacher's description of her neighbors' reaction reflects her struggle on the way to piety, symbolized by the act of donning the headscarf and events surrounding the act. Whereas observing the five daily prayers is also considered an important step on the way to Muslim piety, it is the donning of the headscarf, an act that is unequivocally public, that is considered by practicing Muslims a real litmus test of her *iman* [Tat./Ar. 'faith']. In line 3, for example, the teacher uses the fact that "there were almost no [women] there in headscarves" to support her earlier statement in line 2 that "in the town where I was born, [there were] very few Muslims." Her narrative continuous with the description of neighbors' (as well as "others" and relatives') negative reaction to her donning of the headscarf (lines 4-7), animated by the teacher in a direct speech (lines 6; 18-19). Derogatory Russian terms like "*monashka*,"<sup>112</sup> "*mudjahideen*," or "*shakhidka*" came up over and over in my interviews with practicing Muslim women as some of the names Muslim women were often called because of their Islamic dress. These terms reflect an average person's (specifically, a secular ethnic Russian's or a secular ethnic Tatar's) initial stereotypical perception of a practicing Muslim woman in Russia. The teacher's description of her neighbors', relatives' and other people's reaction to her piety

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<sup>112</sup> The Russian word "*monashka*" ['nun'] has a negative connotation in present-day Russia. It refers not only to a woman's secluded life-style but also to her inability to adjust to the worldly life (to marry, have children, etc.), which further implies some deficiency in the woman's character. A more neutral term for a "nun" in Russia is "*monakhinia*."

further demonstrates her ability to relate her self to others, an important mechanism for achieving coherence.

In line 7, the teacher takes a pause to reflect on her experience and uses the moment to share with the students her way of dealing with the difficulties on her road to piety (lines 8-12). Linde (1993) suggests that reflexivity—the narrator’s ability to treat herself as an other, which is most often done through “the determination of the moral value of the self” (p. 105), is crucial for achieving narrative coherence. The teacher not only emphasizes the importance of patience (line 7), but also refers for guidance to a specific source of Muslim religious authority—*ahadith* [Ar. ‘accounts of exemplary sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad’]. These accounts, put together in collections in accordance with certain denominations within Islam, are considered by Muslims second only to the Qur’an itself in their importance and thus are carefully studied. The teacher’s reflexivity here is acknowledged by Olima, who, even if she hasn’t gone through the exact same experience herself, can at least relate to it on a moral level.

The teacher’s ability to maintain continuity of the self throughout her narrative is evident in her continuous references to time. Having shared her initial struggles and reflected on the experience, the teacher then proceeds to account for a change that she had noticed in others’ perception of her within a year’s time (lines 7; 12; 14). As I have noted above, the “before and after” pattern is common for conversion narratives when a convert relays her experiences before and after the conversion. Here, the teacher herself comments on the difference: “completely, a year passed by, [they] talk differently” (lines 14-15), and the “before and after” pattern is further evident in the teacher’s articulation of her neighbors’ comments that changed from chauvinistic terms to approval, such as

“good for you”; “[she] doesn’t drink or smoke” (lines 14-15); and “**Masha’Allah**” [Ar. ‘God has willed it’] (line 20). Here, again, Olima relates to the teacher’s story by repeating other’s positive comments (line 21).

The teacher signals the end of her piety story by a concluding statement “that’s the way it was” (lines 20, 22). She then proceeds to once again reflect on her experience by saying: “Well, I think it happens practically for everybody this way” (line 22). This statement is particularly important because it conveys the teacher’s acknowledgement of other practicing Muslims’ experience. By pointing out in line 23 that Olima’s situation is somewhat exceptional because Olima was born into and grew up in a practicing Muslim family (“Well, ok, Olima has grown up in a family, right, where. . .”), the teacher indirectly qualifies that by “everybody” she means those women for whom Muslim piety was not a “given,” but a journey. According to the teacher then, her personal piety story is in a way a reflection of a collective religious experience of practicing Muslim women. Moreover, the fact that the teacher has the knowledge of other Muslims’ experiences of their road to piety indicates that these experiences do not simply exist: they are *shared*.

Olima’s reaction to the teacher’s story is telling on many levels. While she is able to relate to the teacher’s experience (as evidenced in her supportive comments throughout the teacher’s narrative), Olima’s knowledge of the experience is more second-hand (mediated) than first-hand (intimately personal). For example, in response to the teacher’s qualification that Olima’s situation is an exception, Olima enthusiastically responds: “It’s really interesting for me to be listening to all this; [I] would have liked to go through this” (lines 24-25), where “this” is a newly observant Muslim woman’s experience on the road to piety. Whereas the teacher jokingly says that “it’s not worth it” (lines 26; 28), Olima

explains what attracts her in these experiences—and stories based on them—“It’s a just a precious feeling probably...is appreciated afterwards” (lines 31; 33).

This life-changing experience, summarized in the teacher’s words “and, of course, [you] look differently at everything” (line 34) and epitomized by her donning of the headscarf “the feeling, of course, is yes, the headscarf is appreciated” (line 32) is her personal-experience-based, yet not unfamiliar to Olima, which is what might make it seem so attractive. In lines 35-36 Olima reveals her further familiarity and fascination with piety stories and experiences they convey: “I have heard all kinds of stories, at the Nurulla mosque during every single trip there. A girl was telling a story, and I was in shock ( ), remember, in total shock.” Olima’s statement reveals that piety stories are common (“during every single trip”), diverse (“all kinds of stories”), that they take place in particular spaces and circumstances (“the Nurulla mosque”); they are shared (“a girl was telling a story”) and reacted to (“I was in shock ( ), remember, in total shock”). The teacher’s affirmative agreement with Olima’s statement (“Yes, yes” line 37) indicates that Olima’s familiarity with piety stories can be related to, and thus it is not uncommon.

The teacher’s story analyzed above is another example of a piety story. Shared extemporaneously during a class break, the story served two main purposes, intentional or not: (a) it helped the teacher bond with her students by sharing her personal experience that the students could relate to on some level and (b) it created an informal teaching opportunity for the teacher to indirectly (by way of personal example) encourage her students to persevere in their faith and stay on the road to piety. I further argue that the story sharing experience was successful because the teacher was able to achieve coherence throughout her narrative, by creating a sense of a continuous self in time, by

clearly positioning herself in relation to others, and by reflecting on her experience. The fact that Olima, a student who might have been least inclined to relate to the teacher's story (because Olima was raised a practicing Muslim) enthusiastically reacted to and engaged in the story-telling experience suggests that the teacher's story was successfully shared and received.

Linde (1993, pp. 101-102) emphasizes that the narrator is successful in telling a story if she can position herself in such a way that she is distinguishable from others (different and unique), and yet not to the point where others are not able to relate to her. Furthermore, Gilligan argues: "women must define themselves relationally, rather than individually or oppositionally" (as cited in Linde, 1993, p. 104). Olima's reaction to the teacher's story indicates that the teacher has succeeded in conveying her unique, yet recognizable, experience on the road to Muslim piety. The teacher's successful, even if impromptu, narrative, as well as her knowledge of other pious women's experiences, indicate the teacher's familiarity with the ways piety stories are shared, their cultural significance and particularities.

Olima's final comment about her experience of regularly hearing piety stories, such as the one told by the teacher, at the Nurulla mosque suggests the importance of the communicative practice of sharing piety stories. It reveals that observant Muslim women talk about their road to piety on a regular basis, in spaces where they feel secure and comfortable, such as a mosque, a *medrese*, or a private home, and with audiences who would be able to relate to their experience, such as other practicing Muslim women or women showing some interest in Islam. Therefore, piety stories, while deeply personal in their detail and individual women's circumstances, are a culturally accepted

communicative practice, made public within the *Ummah*, the Muslim community, in the moment of sharing.

### **Role Reversal and Reciprocation in the Sharing of Piety Stories**

Olima's final comment in the excerpt above is not the only example of metatalk about piety stories, talk in which a woman comments on the communicative practice itself. Throughout my fieldwork and in the process of sharing their stories with me, women often (even though frequently only in passing) commented on the practice of sharing piety stories, thereby acknowledging the culturally shared significance of it. Furthermore, as the next data segment illustrates, the experience of sharing piety stories often involves reciprocation, whereby the speaker shares her story with the audience and then either directly invites other audience members to share their stories or the audience members volunteer to do so, resulting in a role reversal of sorts. Such reciprocity allows for further identity and group membership negotiation, but also creates a sense of unity in the discursive community if the narrated experiences conform to the culturally shared values.

The datum below is part of an informal conversation that took place between me and a group of mostly ethnic Tatar and a couple of ethnic Russian Muslim female students at the Russian Islamic University (RIU) in Kazan, following an informal presentation about American Muslims that I gave there as part of a research grant requirement.<sup>113</sup> Having met some of the women and received questions about American life, I volunteered to tell the women my impressions about American Muslims and life in the U.S. As my presentation was drawing to an end, women from the audience started

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<sup>113</sup> I conducted dissertation research with support from the IREX-IARO 2009-2010 grant.

asking questions about my own life. They wanted to know how long I had lived in the U.S., if I had a family, where my spouse was from and whether he was a Muslim. Finally, one of the women in the audience asked: “*Vy davno v islame?*” [Ru. ‘Have you been in Islam for a long time?’] and *Kak davno Vy v islame?* [Ru. ‘How long have you been in Islam?’]. These questions that were posed to me after my presentation, in their exact form, served as a culturally understood invitation to share one’s piety story with others. In the excerpt below, having answered the women’s questions, I solicit the audience’s comments on the social practice of sharing stories about one’s path to Islam that we – the audience and I – have just engaged in. Gulnara (marked by “G.”), an ethnic Tatar and a RIU student answers my (marked by “L.”) question, an audience member (marked by “A.”) agrees with her, and an ethnic Russian Muslim convert (marked by “S.”), also a RIU student, joins in the discussion toward the end.

*Informal conversation at the Russian Islamic University - data segment # 3:*

- L: 1. Is it common to share stories about one’s path to Islam?  
G: 2. Well, we have, sort of, for how long, for four years, a tradition, always as soon  
3. as freshmen [arrive], we gather them all around a table, and everyone shares  
4. them  
[  
L: 5. Really?  
G: 6. yes, who came how, and so I’ve just noticed for all those years, well, from the  
7. freshmen year, I’ve noticed that **Allah subhana wa ta’ala**<sup>114</sup> [Ar. ‘God, May  
8. He be Glorified and Exalted’]; somehow himself maybe chooses, so that  
9. precisely, precisely these people, with some distinct characteristics, precisely  
10. for the first time entered school here, and then with every year [you]  
11. understand how people come to Islam and [you] become convinced that, well,  
12. **Allah subhana wa ta’ala** [Ar. ‘God, May He be Glorified and Exalted’], he  
13. himself, not due to some reasons—we sometimes look for a reason as to why  
14. this particular person came to Islam—**Allah subhana wa ta’ala** [‘God, May  
15. He be Glorified and Exalted’], I don’t know, due to some actions  
16. himself leads the person to Islam.  
[

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<sup>114</sup> This spelling reflects the way the phrase is often pronounced among Tatars. A normative way to pronounce the phrase is “Allah subhanahu wa ta’ala.”



- A: 17. Yes, yes.
- G: 18. Simply unexpectedly, somehow leads to Islam, and that's it=
- L: 19. I agree that it's difficult to find one common denominator  
[  
Yes, yes.
- A: 20. [1 turn omitted]
- G: 21. Yes, Allah somehow distinguishes certain people with his grace, precisely  
22. because [he] leads [them] to [the] understanding, whereas sometimes [you] can  
23. keep explaining to some people, and it's simply impossible if everything is  
24. shut off [inside them].  
[
- R: 25. Yes, *Allah tägalüdan*<sup>115</sup> [Tat. 'from God, the Exalted'], until a time comes,  
26. any situations won't help, this is the first reason: Allah opens up our hearts.  
[
- S: 27. Yes, if there were some  
28. extraordinary situations, right, and as a result they would always lead people to  
29. religion, but there are a lot of these kinds of situations in people's lives  
[
- A: 30. A lot, a lot, yes, yes=
- S: 31. =There are everywhere, just take any person, I always look outside on the  
32. street, there are lit windows, and behind each window is not just one life, not  
33. just one destiny, but many, a family, as a rule, but everyone has its own  
34. [life/destiny], right, even though they are together, they all have their stresses,  
35. some problems, I don't know, difficult situations=
- A: 36. =Yes, yes, yes=
- S: 37. = but not all come [to religion], there isn't a single principle [reason].

In lines 2-4 and 6, Gulnara talks about the “tradition” among RIU students of sharing stories about one’s path to Islam, about “who [came] how” (line 6). Gulnara recalls that the tradition existed for four years, for as long as she has been a student at RIU. According to Gulnara, older students like herself welcome new students by soliciting stories from them. In lines 6-16 Gulnara indirectly explains the value of the experience of listening to piety stories: “for all those years” (line 6), “with every year, you understand how people come to Islam” (line 10). In lines 12-16 Gulnara shares a personal revelation that she has arrived at after listening to the stories: she became

<sup>115</sup> “*Allah tägalü*” is an older borrowing from Arabic and translates from Tatar as “God, the Exalted.” The affix “dan” is a Tatar language affix that indicates the elative case whose meaning is “from/out of.” Thus, the phrase is a mixture of Arabic and Tatar and translates as “From God, the Exalted.”

“convinced that, well, **Allah subhana wa ta’ala** [Ar. ‘God, May He be Glorified and Exalted’], he himself, not due to some reasons – we sometimes look for a reason as to why this particular person came to Islam.” I argue that Gulnara doesn’t dwell on the details of an individual story not because they are, or the story-sharing process itself, are unimportant, but because she has regularly experienced it for at least “four years” (line 2), and it became natural, a “tradition,” something taken for granted, and yet still important. I further suggest that, similarly to the “Woman in Islam” teacher, Gulnara sees one’s resolve in staying on the road to piety as, ultimately, a will of God, without which the journey would not happen in the first place. Gulnara reiterates this sentiment repeatedly in lines 18 and 21 through 24.

Moreover, the fact that the sentiment is shared by other Muslim women in the audience, which is evident in their comments (lines 25-26; 27-29; 30-37), points to the shared system of values. Referring to a shared system of beliefs as a coherence system, Linde (1993, p. 163) suggests that the absence or present of such a coherence system points to the shared stance (or distance) between the speaker and the audience. The ultimate social significance behind coherence systems is that they “provide people with a vocabulary for creating a self” (Linde, 1993, p. 189). This notion is similar to Stromberg’s (1993) assertion that the author of a conversion narrative draws on the canonical language in the process of narrating his or her conversion experience, which enables self-transformation.

Drawing on that, and based on the data segment discussed above, I argue that the coherence system shared by the women—their faith in Allah and his will as the ultimate cause for everything—provides the women with vocabulary to share their piety stories in

such a way that enables the narrator to practice her beliefs, and the audience, to share in them and follow on her path, thereby affecting personal and social transformation. For Gulnara, the significance of story telling, therefore, is both in its immediate process of identity-performing and bond-making possibilities (otherwise the tradition wouldn't exist in the first place), but also in its larger function of making sense of the world and arriving at truths that are collectively shared and re-enforced, based on other people's experiences and in the context of her own and shared beliefs. It is through the process of listening to others' stories for "several years" that Gulnara became convinced that Allah "himself leads a person to Islam" (line 16).

Finally, the way women use language in the process of sharing stories or while talking about the story-sharing experience sheds light not only on our understanding of how identities are performed and transformed, but also on what these communicative practices tell us about social realities that they are part of. In lines 8, 13, 16 Gulnara switches to Arabic while referring to Allah (marked in the script with bold). The phrase "**Allah subhana wa ta'ala**" is part of the Muslim canonical language and translates roughly from Arabic as "God, May He be Glorified and Exalted" to express reverence while referring to God. Code-switching to Arabic, and this longer version of the term in particular, points to a certain degree of piety that Gulnara, who is in her early twenties, aspires to observe.

In the process of conducting interviews and observations, I noticed that younger Muslim Tatar women use religious terms in Arabic often and freely and prefer them to Tatar religious terms. I have also noticed that those women who use Arabic terms extensively rarely know their exact meaning because they learn the words' usage in

context, as opposed to through a dictionary or a language class. This points to generational differences among observant Muslim Tatar women. Younger women are more likely to study Islam in Russian and thus to be religiously socialized in Russian and Arabic. Gulnara's code-switching to Arabic indicated her lesser attachment to the ethnic (Tatar) element of her identity and stronger attachment to the religious one, a trend that is becoming commonplace among Tatars under the age of thirty.

As the data analysis above illustrates, the practice of sharing life, or piety, stories is a communicative act that is becoming commonplace—a tradition—as more Tatar women become observant Muslims. While there are similarities to some of these stories—and the way they are shared—this tradition is not monolithic and its particularities can shed light onto a variety of Muslim Tatar women's experiences, belief systems, and larger social realities that they are part of.

### **A Piety Story Without Conversion**

A final data segment presented below illustrates a narrative that is significantly different both in content and language use from the previous examples for two reasons. Unlike the examples above, it was not presented spontaneously by the teller: I solicited the woman's piety story, which she shared with me at her home, in the presence of her adult daughter, also a practicing Muslim. But secondly, and most importantly, in her piety story the interviewee did not relay a conversion experience per se, typical for born-again Christians and practicing Muslim Tatar women. Rather, claiming that she was *born* a Muslim, Zubarzhat *khanim* [Tat. 'madam']<sup>116</sup> conveys her life-long commitment to

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<sup>116</sup> The term "*khanim*" is a formal form of address used to address a woman. It is more formal and indicates distance between the speaker and the addressee than the Tatar term "*apa*," literally translated as "aunt," and used to address

Muslim piety. Such a narrative turn, emphasizing a woman's long-term commitment of faith, even if at different points in life she was not a practicing Muslim, allows for creation of a continuity of faith even when the physical Muslim piety was not always there. As Linde (1993) suggests, such continuity creates the notion of coherence of not only the story, but also the narrator's identity. I argue that in the context of the Tatar Muslim revival when the older generation of Tatar women (sixty and up) became practicing Muslims later in life (because of the Soviet state's atheist policy), piety stories allow older women to demonstrate their life-long commitment to faith. This commitment further translates into a continuity of their identity, coherence in their lives, and ultimately, the moral standing of their character. In such instances, the performance of piety stories still allows for a woman's personal transformation, but the one that has been in the making all her life. While I discuss this argument in more detail and support it with two narratives in the next chapter (chapter 5), I include Zubarzhat *khanim*'s narrative here because of the way she phrased her response to my request to share her story with me.

A woman in her sixties, Zubarzhat *khanim* was a public figure well known among Tatars, who was still professionally active and enjoyed a certain amount of fame. Her above-average socio-economic status also set her apart from the majority of younger observant women who were at the beginning stages of their professional careers. I met with Zubarzhat *khanim* several months into my fieldwork. By that time, I was accustomed to hearing the question "How did you come to Islam?" Perhaps having internalized it, I often began my interviews with it and heard a piety story in response. I began my interview with Zubarzhat *khanim* with the same question. Zubarzhat *khanim*'s

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one's older sister, female relative, or a woman older than the speaker. As a "native," I felt obligated to observe these forms of address not only in the field, but also while referring to older women in my analyses here. I addressed Zubarzhat as "*khanim*" out of respect and because of her status as a public figure.

immediate response was different from the way most young women whom I interviewed responded to this question, which underscores an interesting generational difference among Muslim Tatar women. Many young women associated stepping on the road to piety with the moment they began daily observances of Muslim rituals (such as the five daily prayers, for example) and often began their stories with accounts of immediate experiences that led to those daily observances. The older generation of practicing women frequently considered their entire lives as journeys to Muslim piety, where becoming a practicing Muslim was one of many experiences along the way.

Unlike the other data segments analyzed above, Zubarzhat *khanım* spoke with me in Tatar, using Russian and Arabic words every once in a while. While the interaction is translated from Tatar into English in the excerpt below, I preserved the original language where I judged it to be important for clarifying a thought.<sup>117</sup> In accordance with transcription conventions I use throughout the dissertation, ***Tatar*** words are italicized and bold-faced; **Arabic** words are bold-faced, and *Russian* words are italicized.

*Zubarzhat khanım's piety story - data segment # 4:*

- L: 1. Zubarzhat ***khanım*** [Tat. 'madam'], how did you come to Islam? This is my first  
2. question.
- Z: 3. I did not come to Islam; I was born in Islam. First, historically, my forefathers  
4. were in Islam. And I was born. And I was most probably born with ***tuly iman***  
5. [Tat. 'complete faith']. ***Allahı tǵalā*** [Tat. 'God, the Exalted'] [gave] me *complete*  
6. ***iman*** [Tat. 'faith'], *complete iman*, you understand, right?
- L: 7. Yes.
- Z: 8. So. Because, since my childhood, since the time I could remember, my very first  
9. thought was: "Who created this world?" I would also give this question to my  
10. teachers, and to my parents...my parents did not have time to give the answer,  
11. and yet my only thought [was]: "Who created this world? Who created this  
12. nature? Who gives us sustenance? Who created a thousand different flowers,  
13. trees, these...this beauty, harmony who created it? A thousand different flowers  
14. emerge from this black soil, a thousand kinds emerge, a million – why is black

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<sup>117</sup> It is possible that throughout her interview, Zubarzhat *khanım* occasionally used Russian to clarify for me Tatar words that she found important, yet difficult for someone with limited Tatar to understand.

15. soil the way it is? Who creates/produces it? Who am I? Why does my mind work  
 16. this way? Why do different thoughts come to my mind? Why does my heart ache  
 17. here?" My heart here, you understood, right? "Why does it ache? Why do they  
 18. tell me that to act this way is good, and to act that way is bad? Why does my soul,  
 19. my heart, why does it tell me [a certain way]? Why should one act this way, but  
 20. not that way? Who is telling me this? Who am I guided by? *Who guides me? Who*  
 21. *guides me?*" So, these were my very first questions. And so...
- L: 22. And when did these questions...
- Z: 23. *As far back as I remember myself, as far...then when I started growing up, right, I*  
 24. *started to realize, but before...* I would look, when I was a child, would look...I  
 25. will say this in Tatar: I would be in awe. I would be taken away, while looking at  
 26. this beauty, this world. *So.* And then...after growing up and beginning to work,  
 27. so, when I was in school, I would exhaust my teachers: "Where is the end of the  
 28. earth? Where is this, the universe's end? Why does the earth not fall?" They  
 29. would explain to me the laws of physics, *but they would not satisfy me*  
 30. *because...*they, they...I understood that they did not give the full answer. They  
 31. don't know themselves. Don't know, don't know the answer to my questions. So,  
 32. after that, then...my grandma performs the prayer. I see my grandma perform the  
 33. prayer. Freezing winter. The bathroom is outside, outdoors. Grandma goes  
 34. outside, takes **kumgan** [Tat. 'pitcher for ritual ablution'], on her feet [are] felt  
 35. boots. Do you know what felt boots are? These, woolen boots, this kind of felt  
 36. boots, this kind (*shows their height*). [She] puts them on bare feet, goes outside,  
 37. takes **taharüt** [Tat. 'ablution'] there, then comes back in, a washbowl, this,  
 38. *washbowl, washbowl*, washes in cold water, *and* – warm water puts in **kumgan**,  
 39. of course – washes her feet. Then – [it was] small, my grandma's house was  
 40. small, and ours was small. There, you know, winds blow, [you] couldn't walk  
 41. barefoot on the floor. Grandma spreads **namazlyk** [Tat. 'prayer rug'], stands on  
 42. it with bare feet, performs **namaz** [Tat. 'Muslim ritual prayer'].

Unlike younger women, Zubarzhat *khanim* does not begin her narrative with a set point in time when she came to Islam (lines 3-6). Instead, she explains that she "was born in Islam" (line 3). However, her reasoning as to why she was born and thus is now a Muslim is different from that of Aygul's in an earlier data segment recorded at an *Iftar* dinner. Aygul, in her attempt to reassure Chulpan that she indeed was a Muslim, relied on both theological reasoning (every person is born a servant of God and thus a Muslim) and the presence of the Muslim name-giving ritual. Zubarzhat *khanim*, however, suggests that she has always been in Islam because: "First, historically, my forefathers were in Islam. And I was born. And I was most probably born with complete faith" (lines 3-5).

Zubarzhat *khanim* emphasizes the importance of her ancestors' religion in determining her own religious identification. Furthermore, by stating that she was born with "complete faith," Zubarzhat *khanim* may be referring to the Maturidi theology of Islam, which was the foundation of the Hanafī *madhhab* [Ar. 'Muslim school of law'] traditionally practiced by Tatars, and in accordance with which one's faith [*iman*] does not increase or diminish, but is a given constant (what changes is one's degree of piety). Finally, when Zubarzhat *khanim* states that she was born with complete faith, she uses the Tatar word "*iman*," an Arabic borrowing that denotes one's embrace of and commitment to Islam. Therefore when Zubarzhat *khanim* states that she was born with complete faith, she refers to specific faith—the faith of her Muslim Tatar forefathers. In lines 5-6, when Zubarzhat *khanim* emphasizes that God gave her complete faith, she once again uses another Arabic borrowing to refer to God [Tat. '*Allahī tǵalā*'], a term that I heard repeatedly during my research but was less common when I was growing up in Tatarstan in the 1990's.

Zubarzhat *khanim*'s response to my original question (lines 3-6) reflects the traditionally strong association of ethnic and religious identity among Tatars. In other words, for Zubarzhat *khanim*, to be born to Muslim Tatars is to be born a Muslim Tatar. Unlike the newly emerging sentiment among predominantly younger (ages between teens and late twenties) practicing Muslim Tatars who suggest that being a Tatar does not mean being a Muslim, there is a strong association between one's ethnic and religious identity among an older generation (fifty plus) of practicing Tatars and non-practicing Tatars of all ages—the majority in today's Tatarstan. As Mukhametshin (2009) suggests, this could be due to the fact that during the Soviet period Islam was relegated into the realm of



*ethnic* rituals and traditions. But it could also be due to the fact that, as a Tatar *abıstay* [Tat. ‘a female religious authority’] recently observed in a public roundtable discussion among Muslim women,<sup>118</sup> a distinct feature of the Hanafi school of law in Sunni Islam—the Muslim school of law that Tatars have traditionally observed—is that a non-practicing Muslim is still considered a Muslim, even if a sinful one. The *abıstay* stressed this feature of the Hanafi *madhhab* [Ar. ‘Muslim school of law’] in comparison of the Salafi Islamic tradition, which, according to her, considered a non-practicing Muslim a non-Muslim (Shakir, 2012). From that perspective, Zubarzhat *khanım*’s idea of what it means to be a Muslim is somewhat similar to that of Aygul who, during the *Iftar* dinner, persuaded Chulpan that she was still a Muslim even though a non-practicing (and thus a sinful) one. However, unlike Aygul, who stressed the ritual prayer as a turning point on her road to piety—a common practice (along with the hijab narrative) among younger women—Zubarzhat *khanım*’s narrative did not have such a point.

In lines 8-21 Zubarzhat *khanım* recalls her childhood experience of contemplating the world and, particularly, its creator. Her story begins with her birth and continues with her childhood memories, thus taking a different path than that common among younger practicing women. Similarly to Aygul, who emphasizes the time she started praying, the “Woman in Islam” teacher concentrates on experiences associated with her donning of the headscarf—acts that marked how the younger women “came to Islam” or “accepted Islam” and that were often identified with specific Muslim practices. Even though Zubarzhat *khanım* had been a practicing Muslim for several years before our encounter (she prayed five times a day, wore the headscarf, and had performed hajj, the Muslim

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<sup>118</sup> The forum was organized by the Muslim Spiritual Board of the Republic of Tatarstan and featured female scholars who specialized in Islam and female Muslim activists.

pilgrimage to Mecca), throughout the rest of her narrative she did not focus on specific practices that made her a Muslim. Rather, Zubarzhata *khanım* talked about how “*tuly iman*,” complete faith that was given to her by “*Allahı tügalä*” [Tat. ‘God, the Exalted’], directly or sometimes at the intuitive level reflected on her entire life. In that sense, Zubarzhata *khanım*’s whole life story is a piety story.

The trajectory of Zubarzhata *khanım*’s narrative reflects another generational difference among practicing Muslim Tatar women. Older women whom I interviewed, most of whom were in their sixties or older and retired, did not see a contradiction between their pre-retirement secular life and their increasingly observant life around the time of retirement. Just like Zubarzhata *khanım*, they told me that they had always had *iman*, faith, in their hearts, which had been passed along from their parents and grandparents. Even though they did not pray or did not wear the headscarf during most of their adult lives, they always tried to live in accordance with the moral principles of their faith, as they often told me, and as two narratives that I analyze in the next chapter will illustrate. Perhaps this is why, as I observed, it was much less common for older practicing Muslim Tatar women to ask each other about their path to Muslim piety. I argue that the older generation shared an assumption that they were always pious in their hearts, and retirement at an older age (along with the post-Soviet freedom of religion) enabled them to begin to practice Muslim piety on a daily basis. From that perspective, their road to piety was a life-long project, un-interrupted (even if indirectly shaped) by the social realities that it was part of, as was their personal transformation. The older women’s model for personal and social transformation—reflected in the trajectories of

their piety stories—is not tied to a moment of conversion, but, rather, rooted in their rich life experience and faith that they carried on throughout their lives.

In this chapter, I introduced and analyzed the communicative practice of sharing a form of personal narrative that I call “a piety story.” While these stories are united by a common leitmotif—one’s path to Muslim piety—they are not monolithic and vary based on the communicative situation and the speaker’s individual life circumstances. Taking place in a religious social context, these narratives may be shared spontaneously at an informal private gathering, such as an *Iftar* dinner, during a class break or a presentation, or may be solicited by the original narrator from the audience to achieve the reciprocity of sharing. Whatever the case may be, I suggest that piety stories, similarly to life stories (Linde 1993), serve important pragmatic communicative and social functions. They provide a culturally specific way to perform identity, negotiate group membership, and forge a communal bond, both within the immediate discursive community and the global Muslim *Ummah*. Most importantly, drawing on Stromberg (1993), I suggest that piety stories serve as a source of agency as they provide a discursive way for the speaker to re-affirm her commitment to Muslim piety and for the audience, a blueprint for achieving it. It is in this moment of interaction—in the sharing of the narrative experience of faith—that possibilities for personal and social transformation occur.

## CHAPTER 5

### **“BY THE GRACE OF GOD”: PIETY STORIES OF SOVIET-ERA WOMEN AS NARRATIVES OF MORAL SELVES**

Drawing on identity narratives of two older, Soviet-era Tatar women from different walks of life and with varying degrees of piety, this chapter explores how—by creating coherence in their piety stories—the women position themselves as moral subjects (and thus good Muslims) in the face of personal and social change. This is particularly true of those practicing Muslim women who were born and grew up in the Soviet Union and became practicing Muslims later in life, following the post-Soviet Muslim revival. The official state policy of atheism, preceded by centuries of Russian imperial colonization, created political and social conditions that virtually prevented people from practicing their religion on a daily basis. Because Muslim piety is grounded in daily physical practices, such status of religion vernacularized Islam, pushing it underground and out of the realm of the daily religious into the realm of ethnic customs and traditions observed on special occasions. For traditionally Muslim Tatars this meant a loss of access to both abstract (theological) religious knowledge and practical quotidian physical observances that constitute the very essence of Muslim piety and Muslims’ identity.

The recent Muslim revival created conditions that enabled a return of Islam into the fabric of the everyday life, manifested by an increasing number of Muslim Tatars’ embracing physical manifestations of Muslim piety. Nevertheless, the majority of Tatarstan’s and Russia’s population—among them non-practicing Tatars and, largely, those who hold secular views—are unconvinced about the physical aspect of Muslim

piety as an integral part of the spiritual. While they may attribute younger practicing Muslims' religiosity to temporary curiosity, typical for the young age, they are even more skeptical about the older generation's relatively recent interest in observing Muslim piety. Moreover, the younger generation of practicing Muslims themselves may also raise questions about the older generations' character integrity, personal authenticity, and religious commitment. While these younger Tatars may be aware of the Soviet state's atheist policy, they have never lived under those conditions themselves and never experienced them first-hand. Therefore, both groups may challenge the older women's turn to piety by asking why they had not been interested in Islam all their lives, but are—all of a sudden—now turning to it?

Such questions, whether legitimate or not, may result in the older generation's quest for establishing themselves as moral subjects who, as Zubarzhat *khanim*'s narrative in the previous chapter illustrated, have always believed in God and lived by a culturally-accepted set of values that present-day practicing Muslims share and strive to cultivate. I argue that one way women achieve such a moral stance is through ascribing coherence to their lives—and thereby integrity to their character—in the process of sharing their piety stories. The sharing of their narratives then, becomes a moral project and a resource that the older women utilize to achieve agency.

In this chapter, I first compare religious experiences and conceptualizations of Islam by two groups of women who constitute the majority of present-day practicing Muslim Tatars: the younger generation (under thirty) and the older generation (sixty and up). Understanding these differences provides a social context for analyzing the older women's stories and the work they do to present their lives and selves as coherent and

thus moral. I then review the concepts of (a) conversion as a change in one's universe of discourse, (b) biographical reconstruction, (c) master narrative (Snow & Malachuk, 1983, 1984), and (d) coherence (Linde, 1993) to explain how narrators use discursive strategies to create coherence as a basis of morality. I then present segments from two piety stories narrated by older practicing Muslim Tatar women to illustrate how they use specific discursive strategies to create coherence in their lives as a token of their coherent and thus moral selves. The first story, narrated by Madina *apa*, is an example of how the narrator creates coherence in her story by positioning herself as an adequate (moral) character that has always embraced a (moral) value system. The second story, told by Alfia *apa*, demonstrates how the narrative (and thus character) coherence is created through the richness of account (by narrating multiple noncontradictory accounts) and a (moral) value system, both of which serve as a testimony of the narrator's coherent, moral self.

### **Understanding Generational Differences Among Muslim Tatar Women**

The experiences related in the two women's narratives I analyze in this chapter are representative of the older generation of practicing Muslim Tatar women's trajectories of their religious commitment. Their stories also shed light on the ways the older women's experience of piety is different from that of younger women. While the Tatars' interest in Islam is not limited to one particular generation, the present-day community of practicing Muslim Tatars is dominated in size by two groups of women: a younger generation of women (ages between teens and late twenties), and an older generation (women sixty and up).

The first group was born and/or came of age during the Tatars' post-Soviet ethno-religious revival, so Islam has always been part of their lives in some shape or form. Some of these young women were born into observant families and therefore were directly introduced to Muslim practices early on. Others were socialized into the Tatar post-Soviet society with its high interest in Islam, and thus were introduced to some form of Islamic knowledge and practice indirectly through friends, relatives, media. For these women, becoming a Muslim was rarely associated with a need to "explain" absence of religion in their lives before becoming observant Muslims, as a change in their beliefs and practices happened early enough for them to say confidently: "I have been a practicing Muslim all my life." Alternatively, a young woman's interest in Islam could be perceived as her identity-searching, which would be understood as a natural process at an early stage in life.

The older generation's interest in Islam is perceived as a somewhat natural (and culturally expected among the Tatars) stage of one's life, often associated with life after retirement. It was and is still common to hear from the Tatars that they will begin observing important daily Muslim practices (such as the daily prayer, fasting, etc.) as soon as they retire. While retirement provides time flexibility and convenience for observing daily rituals or studying at a local *medrese* or mosque, it also symbolically marks the beginning of the end of life cycle, and, therefore, may be considered an appropriate time for preparing for the end of life. While the older generation's interest in religion may be perceived as somewhat natural by Tatars, the younger generation of practicing Muslims may still wonder about the older women's delayed commitment to piety and question its authenticity.

Questions regarding authenticity and sincerity of religious commitment are even more applicable to women who constitute a minority among practicing Muslim Tatars. These are women who are generationally “in-between”: women in their thirties, forties, and early fifties. They came of age or lived a significant part of their adult lives during the Soviet Union’s collapse and post-Soviet transitions, associated with socioeconomic instability and loss of core values that had been part of their lives. They are too old to be doing soul-searching and too young to join the ranks of long-term retirees. As a result, their turn to piety may be under closer scrutiny than that of younger or older women, and these “in-between” women may feel pressure to provide a culturally acceptable explanation to their newfound religiosity.

Generational differences among practicing Muslim Tatar women are not unique to the women residing in Tatarstan. Commenting on different age groups in the Muslim Tatar community of *medrese*-going female students in Moscow, Sabirova (2006) also highlights three groups of women: *kızlar* [Tat. ‘girls’] - the younger girls less than 22 years of age, most of whom are students; *khanımnar* [Tat. ‘ladies’] - the middle group mostly consisting of working women; and *äbilär* [Tat. ‘grandmothers, older women’] the older group of retirees (p. 148). While noting the age differences among the women, Sabirova proposes to think about the way women position themselves as Muslims in their narratives not in terms of age, but in terms of two models of the Muslim Tatar identity formation process: conventional (for Tatars) and nonconventional (p. 157). The conventional model presupposes the narrator’s locating of her new religious experiences into the framework of the existing Tatar life/environment. In accordance with the nonconventional model, on the other hand, the narrator positions herself as a new,



“different” (from Tatar), type of a “practical Muslim” who values Muslim ritual (bodily) practices and religious knowledge associated with them (p. 158). Sabirova suggests that the nonconventional model is more typical for younger women, while the older generation of women is more likely to embrace the conventional model. As a way to legitimize their Soviet (and sometimes active Communist) past in their stories, these older women try to communicate a sense of “always believing in one’s heart,” even if they did not manifest their beliefs externally (p. 114).

Sabirova’s description resonates with my own observation that, unlike the younger women, many middle aged and older Muslim Tatar women often responded to my request to tell me how they came to Islam with “I did not come to Islam; I was born in Islam,” as Zubarzhat *khanim*’s narrative in the previous chapter illustrated. Their narratives often began with childhood memories of grandparents’ Qur’an and prayer recitations or their parents’ and even their own attempts to secretly observe some Muslim rituals despite the Soviet state’s atheist policy. I propose that the older women conceptualize themselves as Muslims and legitimize their past by creating a continuity of core values in their narratives—as a way to create coherent lives, and thus coherent, moral selves.

### **(Re)constructing Coherent Past to Achieve a Moral Self**

In my analysis of the two women’s stories, I draw from sociology the notion of conversion as a change in one’s universe of discourse (Snow & Malachuk, 1983, 1984) and from linguistics the notion of coherence (Linde, 1993) as a primary discursive strategy involved in creating life stories. As discussed in the previous chapter, Snow &

Malachuk (1983) propose that while religious conversion is often associated with change, a productive way to think about the change is not in terms of a radical personal change, but a change in one's universe of discourse (p. 265). Because such conceptualization presupposes a replacement of once secondary universe of discourse with a primary one, it is not limited to conversion from one religion to another or from absolute lack of faith to becoming a born-again believer. Snow & Malachuk (1983, 1984) further suggest four rhetorical attributes of conversion. Of particular relevance among them are biographical reconstruction and adoption of a master attribution theme.

Biographical reconstruction refers to a rhetorical process whereby "the disjointed pieces are reassembled in accordance with the new universe of discourse and its grammar. Some aspects of the past are jettisoned, others are redefined, and some are put together in ways previously inconceivable. One's biography is, in short, reconstructed" (Snow & Malachuk, 1983, p. 266). The adoption of the master attribution scheme takes place when "feelings, behaviors, and events formerly interpreted with reference to a number of casual schemes are now interpreted from the standpoint of one pervasive schema. [And] matters that were previously inexplicable or ambiguous are now clearly understood" (Snow & Malachuk, 1984, p. 173). Following Staples & Mauss (1987), I depart from Snow & Malachuk's (1984) treatment of biographical reconstruction and adoption of a master attribution theme as rhetorical *indicators* of a convert. Instead, I approach them as rhetorical *strategies* that enable one—in the act of narrative—to position oneself as a coherent and thus moral self. This is where Linde's (1993) notion of coherence becomes useful in helping to understand these strategies within life stories.

Linde (1993) suggests that coherence (rather than factuality) is central to life stories because it is considered a key criterion for external (social) and internal (personal/psychological) judgment. Linde further proposes that in life stories coherence is based on exhibiting causality and maintaining continuity, which is achieved on multiple levels and through various strategies. At the most basic (structural) level causality is achieved by use of appropriate clauses (such as “because,” “since,” “therefore,” etc.), and continuity is achieved through consistent use of the past tense.

At the next, social level, continuity may be achieved through establishing adequate causality, defined by Linde as “a chain of causality that is acceptable by addressees as a good reason for some particular event or sequence of events” (p. 127). Adequate causality may be achieved through a) the speaker’s emphasis on certain character traits or b) the richness of the account that is created through temporal depth (stories going back in time) or a set of multiple noncontradictory accounts. In that respect, adequate causality is similar to biographical reconstruction. Finally, at the highest level, coherence is created by drawing on a coherence system, defined as “a discursive practice that represents a system of beliefs and relations between beliefs” (Linde, p. 163). Linde further suggests coherent systems may provide archetypes and vocabulary for creating a self and that most religious systems are examples of coherent systems. A coherence system, then, can be compared to a master attribution scheme, as both presuppose the presence of “one pervasive schema” (Snow & Malachuk, 1984, p. 173).

As I will illustrate, Tatar women of middle/older generation try to achieve coherence in their piety stories as a way of (re)creating moral selves. Their quest for

achieving coherence—and thus positive moral standing in their own eyes and the eyes of others—is necessitated by the fact that they became religiously observant “in the middle” of their adult lives. As such, their “conversion” experience does not fit with Tatars’ culturally accepted expectations of one’s turning to religion at the beginning or end of the life cycle. Furthermore, this need for coherence is intensified by expectations associated with Tatar gender roles that still hold true today for the majority of Tatars (practicing Muslims or not) at least discursively if not in practice. These expectations include modesty, patience, self-control, and ability to conform to (and therefore honor) existing social gender norms.<sup>119</sup>

What the stories analyzed below have in common is the narrators’ age and their attempts to position themselves as moral selves by coherently reconstructing and thus legitimizing their Soviet-era past before they became observant. While the specific rhetorical strategies that the women employ and that are analyzed here differ, an element that unites them is the adoption of a common system of beliefs (a master attribution scheme) that the women draw on to explain events in their lives in order to create coherence at the highest level, the level of a coherence system. In these narratives, this highest order coherence is manifested in the women’s belief that, no matter how accidental and unlikely the women’s paths to Islam were, that they came to Islam by the grace of God, *Allah tūgalü* [Tat. ‘God, the Exalted’].

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<sup>119</sup> Faller (2011) discusses the importance of patience (*sabırlık*) and the ability to keep emotional outbursts in check as gender-specific social expectations of women in Tatar society.

### **Madina *apa*: Moral Character and Value System as Bases for Coherence**

The first data excerpt comes from my first conversation with Madina *apa* [Tat. ‘aunt’], during which she shared her story with me. By talking about the values that have been part of her entire life, Madina *apa* creates the kind of character, the self, that has always been highly moral. I met Madina *apa* in the summer of 2008 when I also interviewed her at one of Kazan’s *medrese*, where she worked at the time. When I came back to Kazan in the summer of 2009 to continue fieldwork, Madina *apa* was still working at the *medrese*, and we talked again. While the second conversation was more informal—as Madina *apa* and I updated each other on what had happened in our lives over the course of the year—it once again turned to the subject of Madina *apa*’s path to Islam. Shared with me over two different occasions (and recorded by me both times), Madina *apa*’s story represents a clear example of a life story defined by Linde (1993) as a “discontinuous unit, consisting of a set of stories that are retold in various forms over a long period of time and that are subject to revision and change as the speaker drops some old meanings and adds new meanings to portions of the life story “ (p. 220).

There are two reasons for including Madina *apa*’s narrative in support of my argument. The first one is Madina *apa*’s age and her own characterization of it. During our second conversation, Madina *apa* told me how she was offered to teach Arabic at a Tatar school because of her age: “I was neither an *äbi* [Tat. ‘older woman, grandmother’], nor a girl then, but a woman of a middle age, which suited them [the school].” Madina *apa*, therefore, was conscious of the age group that she belonged to when she stepped on the path to Muslim piety and that her story represents. Secondly, and most importantly, throughout her piety story, Madina *apa* strived to create a sense of

coherence in her life (and narrative) as a way to position herself as a moral self despite not being an observant Muslim all her life, as her narrative will shortly illustrate. I argue that one coherence strategy that Madina *apa* utilized in her narrative was to emphasize the values that define her (moral) character. Commenting on the speaker's choice of her character as a coherence-creating strategy, Linde (1993) emphasizes that "an explanation rooted within the self and the self's agency, as character traits must be, is preferable to one rooted outside, since an externally based account invites attribution to either accident or determinism" (p. 131). Both data excerpts analyzed below are taken from my first conversation with Madina *apa*. While during our second conversation Madina *apa* retold her piety story to me, it was punctuated by her questions about my own life (as someone she had gotten to know previously) and my responses, which would be a distraction for the analysis at hand.

The first data excerpt below is Madina *apa*'s response to my question about her path to piety. While it was not uncommon for women's eyes to water occasionally as they shared their stories with me, Madina *apa* was fighting back tears throughout her entire narrative. This is particularly evident at the opening (line 4) where, before beginning her story, she first pauses to collect herself, then smiles, and finally chokes up. In my analysis, I do not approach Madina *apa*'s emotional state as a subjective experience that I can have access to or fully understand. Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990) argue that "the reality of emotion is social, cultural, political, and historical" and advocate for a shift in emphasis from emotions as located within the body to "discourses on emotions and emotional discourses [that] are commentaries of the practices essential to social relations" (p. 18-19). Following that stance, I locate Madina *apa*'s emotions in the sociocultural

context and suggest that Madina *apa* was fighting back tears to achieve a culturally appropriate way for a Tatar woman to handle emotional situations: with modesty, patience, and calm.<sup>120</sup> I further believe that the emotional force behind Madina *apa*'s story, illustrated in repeated attempts to fight back tears, speaks, first and foremost, to the sincerity of her narrative.

*Madina apa's story – data segment # 1:*

- L: 1. I am interested in your path to Islam. How did you come-  
M: 2. - to Islam?  
L: 3. You probably lived most of your life during the Soviet Union, right?  
M: 4. *((Very long pause))*. Yes, exactly so *((smiles, then chokes up))*.  
L: 5. I would be grateful if you could share with me-  
M: 6. *((Deep sigh))*. Well, perhaps my whole life *((chokes up))*... I was looking for  
7. purity. It is a part of me ... *((chokes up))*. But the fact that we live... in such a  
8. *((deep sigh))*, not a republic, in such a ... country, where one has to raise children  
9. not in an environment one would like to. That is why I had been doing a lot of  
10. searching *((chokes up))*, I did not know *((long pause))*. Indeed, in the Soviet time  
11. we lived- there was alcoholism, and all of that. This did not leave my family  
12. untouched. The fact that the family that had been created ... was not the  
13. family it should have been, right? *((chokes up))*. The true Tatars, they are a very  
14. pure people, *ime* [Tat: 'right']? *((Deep sigh))*. We were already russified<sup>121</sup> at that  
15. time. And so, we ate what we were not supposed to and led not the kind of life  
16. style we should have led. But when the family was created and the children were  
17. born, I realized that that was not the way to live. The children went to school  
18. *((long pause))* without knowing their own language. What was happening in my  
19. heart! I- *((chokes up))* I don't know what was happening. I-... some force was  
20. leading me exactly where it needed to. At that time, gymnasiums<sup>122</sup> were opening,  
21. Tatar gymnasiums *((sigh))*... And one woman told me: "If you are a Tatar, and if  
22. you don't understand what is happening in your heart, try sending your child to  
23. the Tatar gymnasium." This is where my life, such as it is now, began *((chokes*  
24. *up))*. Everything turned upside down. .... In the first place, I came to religion  
25. because I had to help my child to learn the letters of the Arabic language. Since I

<sup>120</sup> Faller (2011) makes a similar observation, referring, for example, to funerals. Tatar women of childbearing are discouraged from attending funerals and those women who attend are supposed to refrain from crying not to make it more difficult on everyone else (p. 153). This practice differs, for example, from the Russian custom of loud weeping [Ru. 'prichitanie'] during a funeral when close female relatives of the deceased weep and verbally express their grief and sorrow.

<sup>121</sup> Madina *apa* uses the term "obrusevshie" [Ru. 'обрусевшие'] which most often carries a negative connotation of being assimilated by a dominant (Russian) culture.

<sup>122</sup> One of the Post-Soviet secondary education trends was to modify formerly Soviet schools and model new schools after gymnasiums that existed in Russia before the Revolution and were known for a more holistic approach to education. Thus the term "gymnasium" (or "gymnasia") was applied to many new schools opening in the post-perestroika period, whether they actually lived up to the model or not.

26. had sent her to the gymnasium, there was the Arabic language as a subject. I did  
27. not know [the language], and I could not help my child.  
[portion omitted]  
28. As far as Arabic is concerned, I had to learn the letters, so I had to find where  
29. ... I could learn them. I went to a mosque, I ... learned to write and read. I studied  
30. at the mosque for a year, and, naturally I could help my daughter and check her  
31. homework. So this is the way I came [to Islam], gradually, step by step, step by  
32. step ((*chokes up*)).

In the data excerpt above, Madina *apa* begins her story by acknowledging the fact that she lived most of her life during the Soviet Union (line 4). She opens her narrative not with matter-of-fact biographical information, but by describing a set of values—purity—that she believed in her “whole life” (line 6) and that are part of her (line 7). By doing so, Madina *apa* at the very outset positions herself as a certain type of character she is and has always been: pure, moral. By using the adversative conjunction “but,” she then juxtaposes the external conditions that she, as a Soviet and now post-Soviet Russian citizen, has to live and raise her children in (lines 7-9). The fact that, while describing the country as an inappropriate environment for raising children, Madina *apa* switched to the collective “we,” indicates that she is speaking not only on her own behalf, but, possibly, on behalf of the listener, other Muslim Tatar women, or other mothers living in Russia.

Why would Madina *apa* switch the narrator's point of view within the first minute of her story? I argue that the way I invited Madina *apa* to share her story with me (by asking if she lived most of her life during the Soviet Union in line 3) could have been perceived by Madina *apa* as a challenge by a younger generation, represented by me, to "explain" her relatively recent piety and implied absence thereof during the Soviet times. I further claim that in order to address the potential problem of discontinuity in her story,



her life, and her character, Madina *apa* begins her narrative by describing the core values that have always been part of her, that define her self.

Furthermore, speaking on behalf of other women (through the collective “we”), allows Madina *apa* to point out that the kind of life she used to live is a shared experience, a consequence of living in a certain place at a certain time, and thus is not indicative of who she truly is. A similar dynamic continues in lines 9 and 11 where Madina *apa* describes her personal soul searching when everyone (expressed by “we”) lived in a Soviet society plagued by problems. While Madina *apa* acknowledges the social problems, such as alcoholism, that “did not leave her family untouched” (lines 11-12), her use of a passive voice while describing her family at the time (lines 12-13) once again indicates Madina *apa*’s distancing herself from the values she never shared even if they had affected her family. Madina *apa* further negotiates her personal responsibility (or lack thereof) for her family’s problems by stating (in lines 9-10) that she did not know what was the right thing to do and thus could not be held accountable for not doing it.

Madina *apa*’s narrative above is focused on the “before” part of the “before and after” pattern, which is typical for conversion narratives where narrator compares her life (and thus herself) before the conversion (“me then”) and after (“me now”). The “before and after” conversion narrative is an example of reflexivity, which Linde (1993) defines as the narrator’s (“me now”) ability to separate herself from and evaluate the protagonist (“me then”) (pp. 122-123). While becoming a pious Muslim changed Madina *apa* and her family’s lives (as a second data segment will illustrate), Madina *apa* does not distance her present self from her former self entirely, but strives to create a continuity by describing the values she always held important. To do otherwise, would be to not only undermine

her personal integrity, but the integrity of an entire people she represents and speaks on behalf of: the Tatars. Madina *apa* comments on the integrity of Tatars—and thus her own—by stating in line 13 that “the true Tatars, they are a very pure people, *ime* [Tat. ‘right’]?” By phrasing the statement as an alternative sentence with the alternative clause in Tatar (*ime*), Madina *apa* solicits another Tatar’s (the researcher’s) reassurance of the Tatars’, and thus her own, purity. This was not the only instance of Madina *apa*’s expressing her belief in the purity of the Tatars. When I met with Madina *apa* again during my second field trip, she reminisced about her path to piety by recalling that her grandmother was an *abistay* [Tat. ‘female religious authority’] whom she witnessed reciting *namaz*, the daily prayer. “[Faith] probably passes with blood,” Madina *apa* suggested. During my fieldwork I observed that Madina *apa*’s recollection of her pious forefathers was a typical way women of her age started their stories, as Zaburzhat *khanim*’s narrative in the previous chapter also illustrates.<sup>123</sup>

Madina *apa* continues her narrative by providing an alternative explanation for why the Tatars, such as her family, while being a very “pure” people, were not immune from the social problems of the Soviet time: “We were already russified at that time. And so, we ate what we were not supposed to and led not the kind of life style we should have led” (lines 14-15). While the Russian version of the word “russified” often refers to cultural assimilation, language use in particular<sup>124</sup> (as is evident from Madina *apa*’s story), I propose that Madina *apa* implies religious assimilation as well. By saying that they ate what they were not supposed to Madina *apa* refers to her family’s, as well as the majority of other Tatars’, ignorance and/or inobservance of the Muslim dietary

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<sup>123</sup> Sabirova (2006) makes a similar observation in her study of practicing Muslim Tatar women in Moscow.

<sup>124</sup> For “russification” in the context of the language use, see Wertheim (2012, p. 265).

requirements that prohibit the use of alcohol and encourage the consumption of only halal<sup>125</sup> food.

Furthermore, the fact that Madina *apa* refers to the religious assimilation as “russification” points out the fact that, unlike a younger generation of Muslim Tatars who are more likely to separate religious and ethnic elements of identity, people of Madina *apa*’s age and older tend to conflate the religious and the ethnic aspects of identity.<sup>126</sup> This is further evident in Madina *apa*’s connecting the inappropriate lifestyle with her children’s lack of Tatar language skills (lines 16-18), which created a deep moral crisis within her. For Madina *apa*, as well as for her friend who suggested that Madina *apa* send her children to the Tatar school (lines 21-22), to be a moral person means to be a proper, “pure” Tatar, and thus not to be “russified.” I further propose that Madina *apa*’s use of the collective pronoun “we” in her discourse of russification (lines 14-15), may index not just her own family, but an entire community of Tatars who could not live up to their internal purity, due to russification. This is also evidenced by what Madina *apa* told me when we met again upon my return to the field. Commenting on the fact that the Tatar school that she had sent her daughter to held some religious celebrations, Madina *apa* concluded that the Tatars always lived with the religion in their hearts.

On the surface, Madina *apa* summarizes her initial path to Islam as circumstantial and even accidental—as a consequence of her daughter’s entering the Tatar school and Madina *apa*’s having to help her with Arabic (lines 24-31). However, a closer examination of Madina *apa*’s narrative indicates that, while the change (and thus the

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<sup>125</sup> In simplified terms, no pork or alcohol is allowed. For further explanation, see footnote 77 above.

<sup>126</sup> With respect to language use as a marker of ethnic, but also religious identity Faller (2011) observes that “the act of speaking Tatar is thought to affect one’s internal disposition in a way that brings the speaker closer to Islam” (p. 246). I further explore the older generation’s conflation of ethnic and religious identities in chapter 8.

discontinuity) in her life is apparent on the outside, Madina *apa*'s internal character did not change because a quest for purity has always been part of her. Furthermore, Madina *apa*'s description of changes in her life focused on the physical manifestations of piety, which she either believed in but could not practice (in the case of alcohol) or did not know about (in the case of the headscarf and halal food), due to russification:

*Madina apa's story – data segment # 2:*

- M: 33. I studied at the Märjani mosque<sup>127</sup> for a year. At the time, the *Mökhämmädia*  
 34. *mädräsä*<sup>128</sup> had just-, this building wasn't even there; there was something else in  
 35. this building, right? [I] went from one part of the city to another ... part,  
 36. where they gave knowledge of Islam.  
 37. I did not wear the headscarf then, was embarrassed. I would walk into the mosque  
 38. and put it on, then would close the door and take it off. "What would people say?  
 39. What would society say?" That's the way it was. And then, when I learned more,  
 40. deeper about religion, about the fact that it is necessary ..., the Qur'an  
 41. specifically for women, that it is necessary to cover oneself, that it is not for  
 42. something or someone, but for oneself, for one's health, for the society's health.  
 43. So, when I realized that, I took religion seriously. And began to live in  
 44. accordance with the **Shariah** [Ar. 'Muslim normative law'].
- L: 45. How did it change your life?
- M: 46. Oh, it turned it upside down 180 degrees.  
 [portion omitted]
- M: 47. Well, our family always celebrated holidays, you know this, right? And, there  
 48. always was ... alcohol, right? Even when I was not in Islam, I was never a  
 49. supporter [of alcohol]. I didn't want it, I didn't like it. But since the entire society  
 50. lives this way, I had to do the same thing, so that people wouldn't say that you are  
 51. a miser, you don't provide [alcohol], you are this and that, right? ((*chokes up*)).  
 52. When I had come to Islam, I realized that alcohol is not allowed, pork is not  
 53. allowed. Not just prohibited, but fundamentally: why, for what [reasons], what  
 54. good it brings. When you go with knowledge ((*sighs*)), one really wants to ...  
 55. decline all this. And so, gradually, step by step, we were able to achieve all this.

Madina *apa*'s account of how her life changed with practice of Islam is preceded by her description, in lines 33-36, of her journey in search of Islamic knowledge, as a

<sup>127</sup> The name of Kazan's chief mosque, titled after a prominent Tatar thinker of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the only mosque functioning during the Soviet era.

<sup>128</sup> Throughout her narrative, Madina *apa* pronounced "Mukhammadiia *medrese*" in a Tatar way, which is reflected in the transcript.

continuation of her search for purity. The fact that Madina *apa* travelled to the other side of the city to study at the Mārjani mosque, the only functioning Kazan mosque at the time, indicates her strong desire for obtaining religious knowledge that would allow her to *act* on her beliefs. The importance of religious knowledge for Madina *apa*, as well as other “post-Soviet” Muslims of Madina *apa*’s age, can be explained by the fact that Muslim piety is grounded in daily physical practices, the knowledge about which was unavailable during the Soviet time.

Even though Madina *apa* treats the changes in her life as apparent (manifested in the “before and after” discussion of donning of the headscarf (lines 37-43) or embracing Muslim dietary requirements), Linde (1993) would suggest that her ability to speak about them as such is an act of reflexivity indicative of a moral narrator, and thus moral character:

[. . .] the reflexivity created by the act of narration means the speaker is always moral, even if the protagonist of the narrative is not. Thus, if a person tells a narrative that indicates that he or she acted badly, the fact the narrator knows and indicates that the action was not right reveals understanding of and allegiance to the norms shared by the speaker and addressees, even if the protagonist did not know them, or was not able to live up to them at the time. In response to such narratives, a negative judgment can be brought against the protagonist, but not against the speaker. (pp. 123-124)

Similarly, commenting on the process of biographical reconstruction whereby the narrator reconstructs her past, Snow & Machalek (1983) observe: “Gripped by the realization that preconversion interpretations were erroneous, the convert comes to redefine the past ‘correctly’” (p. 267). I argue that the ability of the narrator to reconstruct the past and thereby “redeem” herself in the discursive moment of reflexivity

(a confession of sorts)<sup>129</sup> allows for the possibility of personal transformation of not only the speaker herself, but also—by way of example—the listener. In this particular instance, Madina *apa*'s account of her initial struggle with donning the headscarf serves as a way of saying: "I have been there. I know what you might be going through. I am not perfect, but I did it, and so can you."

I further argue that by stating in lines 48-49 that even before Madina *apa* became a practicing Muslim, she never supported the presence and use of alcohol in her home, Madina *apa* points to the continuity of some of her core values, and thus the integrity of her character. Therefore, while becoming an observant Muslim did change her and her family's lives, it did not change, but empowered her to be the kind of person she had been looking to be all her life: pure and moral.

While important, I argue that character is not the only element that Madina *apa* draws on in her story to create continuity and coherence. Another important characteristic of Madina *apa*'s and other women's stories is the presence of a coherence system, which "provides the environment in which one statement may or may not be taken as a cause of another statement" (Linde, p. 163). The notion of a coherence system is somewhat similar to that of a master attribution scheme, based on research in the sociology of conversion, and refers to a process "by which people form causal interpretations of the behavior of self and others and the events in the world around them" (Snow & Machalek, 1983, p. 269). In the case of Madina *apa* and other women I interviewed, the coherent system is based on their faith, where God is the one who set them on the path to piety, and is *the* ultimate cause of their faith. This sentiment was illustrated in the previous chapter when

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<sup>129</sup> The theological notion of confession typical for Christianity is absent in Islam. There is also no intermediary (in the form of a priest or Jesus Christ): a Muslim must ask God for forgiveness directly.

Gulnara, a student of the Russian Islamic University, shared how listening to new students' stories about their path to Islam, she became convinced why and how people step on the way to Muslim piety.<sup>130</sup>

“with every year [you] understand how people come to Islam and [you] become convinced that, well, **Allah subhana wa ta'ala** [Ar. ‘God, May He be Glorified and Exalted’], he himself, not due to some reasons – we sometimes look for a reason as to why this particular person came to Islam— **Allah subhana wa ta'ala** [Ar. ‘God, May He be Glorified and Exalted’], I don’t know, due to some actions himself leads the person to Islam. [. . .] Simply unexpectedly, somehow leads to Islam, and that’s it. [. . .] Allah somehow distinguishes certain people with his grace, precisely because [he] leads [them] to [the] understanding, whereas sometimes [you] can keep explaining to some people, and it’s simply impossible if everything is shut off [inside them].

Gulnara’s conviction that people turn to Muslim piety by the grace of Allah was enthusiastically supported by other women in the audience, exemplified by an older Tatar woman’s comment: “Yes, **Allah tügalüdan** [Tat. ‘from God, the Exalted’], until a time comes, any situations won’t help, this is the first reason: Allah opens up our hearts.” The sentiment was further supported by a Russian Muslim convert who suggested that all people had problems, but not everyone was a believer and that the presence of faith in one’s heart was ultimately up to God.

As Madina *apa* continued her narrative, she talked about challenges that she and her daughter encountered on their paths to piety. For example, her husband reacted angrily to Madina *apa*’s and her teenage daughter’s donning of the headscarf—a reaction that is not uncommon on the part of male relatives of practicing women, as I discovered during fieldwork. This counters a widespread stereotype, which I frequently heard from non-Muslim and non-practicing Muslims both in Tatarstan and the U.S., that men are the ones who force the women to cover. In the course of our conversation, Madina *apa* suggested that her husband’s original negative reaction to her and her daughter’s

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<sup>130</sup> If a short segment of data did not call for a line-by-line analysis, I did not number the lines in that data segment.

embodied piety could be explained by the fact that, as someone who lived in the secular Soviet state all his adult life, it was not easy for him to change his old habits, such as love for alcohol, for example.

Madina *apa* commented on the struggles she and her daughter encountered on the path to their piety as follows: “There were ... lots of problems, but nonetheless we remained very strong Muslims. May *Allah tğalä* [Tat. ‘God, the Exalted’] further give us strength.” Her comment suggests that the source of her and her daughter’s faith—their ability to become pious Muslim women and their strength to remain so—is *Allah tğalä*. Finally, by concluding that, despite her own ignorance, her husband’s resistance, and social pressure, “gradually, step by step, we were able to achieve all this” (line 55), Madina *apa* attests to personal and social transformation (represented by her husband, older daughter, and relatives), thereby showing the listener the transformative potential of piety.

### **Alfia *apa*: Richness of Account and Value System as Bases for Coherence**

While secular Tatars (and those who consider themselves secular<sup>131</sup>) might interpret Madina *apa*’s ability to attribute the origin and the nature of her faith to God as deterministic and a sign of passivity, practicing Muslim Tatar women take it as a sign of sincere, strong *iman* [Tat. ‘faith’] that they ask for in their daily prayers, and as a sign of agency. I further observed that women often interpreted one’s ability to recognize God’s

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<sup>131</sup> Following Asad (2003), I treat the term “secular” as “a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledge, and sensibilities in the modern world” (p. 25). Based on my fieldwork observations, I conclude that those who consider themselves secular (whether ethnic Tatars or not) in present-day Russia do not always share a certain set of behaviors, knowledge, and sensibilities. One way to describe what unites them is their own perception of themselves as secular. I would also suggest that those Tatars who identified themselves as secular explained to me that they did not necessarily deny the existence or importance of God, or faith. Rather they did not see relevant the daily application of religious observances and practices to their own lives.



will as the first step in one's ability to submit to it, the first step on one's path to Islam as in "the voluntary submission to God." To understand a Muslim's voluntary submission to God and His will as a sign of strong faith and agency, one must abandon, as Mahmood (2005) insists, the Western notion of agency, which is grounded in the notion of an individual freedom that can only be obtained through resistance to and subversion of the authority. "Viewed in this way," Mahmood explains, "what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment" (p. 15).

One characteristic and function of such alternative understanding of agency was that practicing Muslim Tatar women such as Alfia *apa* often narrated their religious experience not only with the benefit of looking back, but also with an intent to recognize certain events or people in their lives as "signs" from God to step on the path to piety. Thereby, they provided an interpretation of the past that both reflected and constituted their commitment to Muslim piety, faith, and, ultimately, God. As Snow & Malachuk (1983) observe, in the process of biographical reconstruction "the disjointed pieces are reassembled in accordance with the new universe of discourse and its grammar" (p. 266). This was particularly true of the middle-aged and older women who, while they lived most of their lives during the Soviet time, were able to attribute pious meanings to certain experiences that had occurred long before the women became observant. A piety story by Alfia *apa* is a case in point.

I met Alfia *apa* one Saturday morning during an informal mosque lesson at the Nurulla mosque. Unlike Madina *apa* who gave up a full-time low-level government job

to raise her children, to teach part time, and then do administrative work at the *medrese*, Alfia *apa* was a former government employee who dedicated her life to a successful professional career (albeit at the expense of her family, which she regretfully admitted during our conversation). Since the teaching job and the job at the *medrese* paid very little, Madina *apa* relied on her husband to provide a middle class standard of living for them. In contrast, Alfia *apa*, admitted to enjoying the benefits of having worked at a high-level government position, such as connections (important social capital in Russia) and a comfortable pension that allowed her to maintain an upper-middle class life style upon retirement. Unlike Madina *apa* who always carefully covered her body and head, Alfia *apa* did not wear the headscarf outside the mosque and was not as committed to performing the five daily prayers at the set times as Madina *apa* was. These differences in observing the Muslim rituals would be enough for the general public and practicing Muslim Tatars alike to locate Madina *apa* and Alfia *apa* at different points on the Muslim piety continuum. Finally, while Madina *apa*'s religious education began at the Mārjani mosque where she attended informal lessons and to which she attributed her initial interest in Islam, she eventually graduated from the Mukhammadiia *medrese*. Her level of religious education, thus, was higher than that of Alfia *apa*'s who admitted to coming to the three-year long informal class at the Nurulla mosque in order to learn how to perform the five daily prayers correctly and how to read the Qur'an on her own.

While Madina *apa* and Alfia *apa* came from different socio-economic backgrounds and, generally, had different life experiences, their relatively late interest in observing Islam—even though not uncommon for middle-aged and older Tatar women—could serve as a reason for a particularly careful evaluation of their commitment to

Muslim piety, the extent and quality of their religious knowledge, or, ultimately, the integrity of their character. Whereas an evaluation of character is always part of an identity negotiation process, I argue that the younger generation of practicing Muslim women often view the middle-aged and older generations' turn to piety with careful attention. I further argue that this is because the younger generation of practicing Muslim women were brought up when the post-Soviet Muslim revival was already under way, which enabled them to be practicing Muslims most of their short adult lives. Therefore, the trajectories of their lives and their paths to piety diverged from those of the Soviet generation of women who were non-practicing most of their lives.

In the course of my fieldwork, I have witnessed how, while listening to an older woman's piety story, younger women expressed their tacit approval or disapproval of a certain act or experience the older woman relayed. This was often done through Arabic religious terms that younger women use frequently in their daily life as a sign of piety. For example, an act that was deemed pious or moral was often met with "*Masha'Allah*" [Ar. 'God has willed it']<sup>132</sup> or "*Subhan Allah*" [Ar. 'Praise be to God'],<sup>133</sup> whereas an act deemed incompatible with Muslim piety was often met with "*Astaghfirullah!*" [Ar. 'I seek forgiveness from God!']<sup>134</sup> I further observed that when it came to the Soviet era women's pre-piety experience, the younger women's response was often silence or insertions of "*Astaghfirullah!*" that was accompanied by the shaking of one's head in disapproval.

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<sup>132</sup> In a daily life, the phrase is used to express praise to Allah and appreciation for an event or person.

<sup>133</sup> The phrase is used in the ritual of *tasbeih* [Ar. 'verbal glorification of God through a sequence of repeated phrases'], as well as in daily life to express an admiration for something good.

<sup>134</sup> In a daily life, the phrase is used by Muslims to express their wish to abstain from doing something wrong or to ask forgiveness for an improper action or feeling. A Muslim is also encouraged to recite the phrase after every ritual prayer.

The younger women's assessment of the older women's piety and character also came through in-group discussions of certain religious issues (at a mosque or *medrese*). In one particular instance, an older Muslim Tatar woman who was a Mukhammadiia *medrese* graduate and occasionally gave informal mosque lessons told me about a younger woman's questioning of the validity of her religious knowledge by asking for proof (citations) from original religious sources. The older woman was offended by the younger woman's questioning of her religious knowledge and thus authority. I would further suggest that the exchange violated the traditional for Tatars custom of treating an older person as a figure of authority, which conveyed respect. This is why, I argue, in their narratives about their paths to Muslim piety Madina *apa* and Alfia *apa* strive to create a sense of coherence, as a way to position themselves as people who have always had faith in their hearts as a moral compass. According to the women's narratives, the recent Muslim revival has finally enabled them to act upon moral values they believed in their whole lives.

Drawing on Linde's (1993) discussion of adequate causality as a prerequisite for coherence, I argue that, unlike Madina *apa*, who relied on her positive character as an adequate cause for piety, Alfia *apa* employed a somewhat different strategy in her story: "richness of account" (p. 135). Linde (1993) suggests that richness of account may be created through (a) temporal depth and (b) multiple noncontradictory accounts. As a form of adequate causality, temporal depth is somewhat related to positive character because, according to Linde, "our tenet of our common-sense view of the self is that an activity, an aptitude, or an ambition that goes back to early childhood must be seen as intrinsic to the self" (p. 135). While Alfia *apa*'s story does not focus on early childhood, it goes back far

enough to achieve a similar effect, as her narrative will shortly illustrate. Furthermore, Alfia *apa*'s story provides several (at least two, by her own admission) noncontradictory accounts of her road to piety. Linde explains that a combination of multiple noncontradictory accounts offer sufficient causality because "they show that a choice was not random or insufficiently motivated" (p. 140). Finally, I propose that, similarly to Madina *apa*, Alfia *apa* ultimately credits *Allah tūgalā* for setting her on the road to piety, thereby locating her story and self within the same coherence system: Islam.

For ease of comprehension and analysis, I present Alfia *apa*'s narrative in three separate data excerpts, divided at the narrative point where Alfia *apa* finishes one account and begins another. I approached Alfia *apa* at the mosque while she and other students were waiting for the arrival of an *abīstay*, a religious teacher, to start the lesson. Alfia *apa* readily agreed to share her story with me and proceeded to begin her narrative then and there, in the presence of her adult daughter (in her mid-thirties) and a close friend (in her early forties), both of whom observed a degree of religiosity similar to that of Alfia *apa*'s, as I later found out. Alfia *apa* paused her narrative when the teacher arrived, with a suggestion to continue it at a restaurant when the lesson was over. Alfia *apa* explained that the three of them enjoyed an occasional lunch at the restaurant after the mosque lesson, so I agreed to join them. The first data excerpt below is Alfia *apa*'s response to my question about how she came to Islam:

*Alfia apa's story – segment # 1:*

- A:   1. So, how did I come to Islam? My mom died early; she was 51, and I was 29. I  
       2. grew up in an atheistic family. My mom was a teacher, and dad was the head of a  
       3. collective farm, meaning faith was out of the question there. You know what kind  
       4. of times those were, right? So. She was born in 1927. My father also worked for  
       5. the police. So, there was never any mentioning of God in the family. And my  
       6. mom passes away at 51. She had an aggressive cancer then. When she was dying-

7. It so happened there were three of us, sisters, and I had to take care of her. And  
 8. she is telling me: “Go find a *babushka* [Ru. ‘old lady’]<sup>135</sup>, *Kizim* [Tat. ‘my  
 9. daughter’], I don’t have long to live. It’s necessary to recite *Yasin*.<sup>136</sup> I didn’t  
 10. even understand what it was, *Yasin*. How so? She had never talked about it.
- L: 11. Did she recite *namaz* [Tat. ‘ritual prayer’]?  
 A: 12. She herself did not recite *namaz*. She did not know anything except *Bismillyahi-  
 13. rahmanir-rahim*.<sup>137</sup> I went looking for a *babushka*, brought her, and *Yasin* was  
 14. recited for her. She was already very ill at the time. When she was dying she said:  
 15. “*Kizim* [Tat. ‘my daughter’], they say there we wait for your prayers only. I was  
 16. *nadan* [Tat. ‘ignorant’],” meaning “uneducated,” “you can not recite, and I could  
 17. not teach you. Go to a mosque from time to time and give alms in my name.” So,  
 18. she passed with this *vasiat* [Tat. ‘covenant’]. And, of course, I would go by a  
 19. mosque and give alms, but not very often. And so there were the following two  
 20. occurrences in my life. So, once I am on my way to work, and an old man cannot  
 21. get on the bus. The crowd pushes him away, he almost falls down, everyone tries  
 22. to get on this bus; everyone is late for work. I approached him—I had extra  
 23. time—and say: “*Babay* [Tat. ‘old man, grandfather’], why are you traveling so  
 24. early? You will get trampled over.” And he says: “*Min kizim* [Tat. ‘I, my  
 25. daughter’],<sup>138</sup> work at a mosque.”
- L: 26. This was in Kazan?  
 A: 27. This was in Kazan. We lived in the x district then. And so, I tell him: “Just a  
 28. minute, I will help you.” So, when a bus came, I sort of pushed him onto the bus  
 29. and asked for a seat for him, I myself traveled standing up. Then the space began  
 30. freeing up on the bus, and I sat down. I tell him: “*Babay* [Tat. ‘old man’],<sup>139</sup>  
 31. since you work at a mosque, may I give you *khäer* [Tat. ‘alms’]? There hasn’t been  
 32. a year yet since my mom died.” And I wrote down for him.<sup>140</sup> He was a very  
 33. religious old man, his eyes were so kind. I did it and forgot about it. And all of a  
 34. sudden, I have a dream that night. My mom greets me home after work, all  
 35. dressed up, a lot of food on the table, she says: “*Kizim* [Tat. ‘my daughter’], sit  
 36. down, I made [it] for you.” I remembered millet porridge, yellow, *tari iarmasi*  
 37. [Tat. ‘millet porridge’], right?
- L: 38. Yes, I know *tari iarmasi*.  
 A: 39. So, I sat down and say: “Mom, why did you do this? You were so sick recently, I  
 40. would’ve cooked myself.” And she goes: “*Iuk, iuk, iuk* [Tat. ‘no, no, no’], *kizim*

<sup>135</sup> Whereas Alfia *apa* uses the Russian word *babushka*, which can be translated as “an old lady” or “grandmother,” she does not mean “grandmother,” an “old lady,” and certainly, not a Russian old lady. She refers to a Tatar old lady, most likely an *abistay*, a Tatar female religious authority who, during the Soviet period, was one of the very few sources of Muslim religious knowledge.

<sup>136</sup> “Yasin” is a Tatar pronunciation of the title of the 36<sup>th</sup> *surah* [Ar. ‘chapter’] of the Qur’an. In accordance with *Sunnah* [Ar. ‘normative conduct based on the Prophet Muhammad’s example’], the *surah* is recited when a Muslim is nearing death.

<sup>137</sup> Alfia *apa* refers to the Arabic phrase that usually translates as “In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.” The phrase opens every Qur’anic *surah*, except the ninth, and is recited during the daily prayer. Tatar Muslims with only the most passing connection to Islam would be familiar with this phrase. In the context of everyday life, the phrase is pronounced by Muslims before doing something in order to receive a blessing from God, and thus succeed at whatever he or she is doing.

<sup>138</sup> Also, “my girl.”

<sup>139</sup> Also “grandfather.”

<sup>140</sup> Alfia *apa* means she wrote down her mother’s name, so that the old man could pray for her mother.

41. [Tat. ‘my daughter’]!” And she pours oil [into the porridge], so happy, so happy.  
42. And so, naturally, when I woke up, I understood why, right? Ok, so that’s one  
43. dream.

Unlike many practicing Muslim Tatar women of her age, Alfia *apa* does not begin her narrative by stating that she had been born in Islam or that she believed in her heart all her life. Quite the opposite, Alfia *apa* begins her narrative by admitting that she grew up in an “atheistic family” (line 2) and that “faith was out of the question there” (line 3). She mentions her parents’ professional background as a possible reason of why “there was never any mentioning of God in the family” (line 5). At the time of Alfia *apa*’s parents’ generation (1940-1950s), one could secure employment and/or build a successful professional career, such as rising to the ranks of the head of a collective farm, only by being an active member of the Communist party and thus by embracing (at least on the outside) the Soviet state’s official policy of atheism.

While other women of Alfia *apa*’s age (for example, Zubarzhat *khanim*, discussed in chapter 4) often told stories about witnessing their parents’ or grandparents’ secret observances of Muslim rituals—in an attempt to illustrate that faith was always part of their family—Alfia *apa* did not provide such accounts. She further illustrates the relative absence of religious observances/discussions in her family by stating that her mother did not recite *namaz* [Tat. ‘ritual prayer’] (line 12) and that “She did not know anything except **Bismillyahi-rahmanir-rahim**” (lines 12-13), a Qur’anic phrase pronounced by Muslims before doing something. According to Alfia *apa*, her own first personal experience with Islam took place at 29 when her mother was dying of cancer and asked Alfia *apa* to find someone to recite “Yasin,” a Qur’anic *surah* (chapter) recited by Muslims at someone’s death bed to ease the process of passing. While Alfia *apa* admits

that she did not understand what “Yasin” was since her mother had never talked about it before (lines 9-10), the fact that her mother asked for it indicates some presence of faith in the family, or their understanding of some religious observances related to life-cycle rituals. It is further evidenced by the fact that Alfia *apa*'s mother, while admitting that she was illiterate in the matters of religion because she could not “recite,” asks her daughter to give alms, so that prayers are said in her name (line 17).

The story of Alfia *apa*'s mother's death could be considered one account of Alfia *apa*'s initial interest in religion. While Alfia *apa* does not mark it as such (by saying, for example, that she would give alms, but not very often – line 19), she begins her narrative with it to provide an important piece of information without which the other two stories would not have had the same rhetorical effect. Furthermore, while Alfia *apa* (who was sixty years old at the time of the interview) did not go all the way back to her childhood, her account of an event that took place thirty years ago provides temporal depth to her story, contributing to the creation of coherence. The fact that at twenty-nine Alfia *apa* was the sole caretaker for her dying mother and was the one to carry out her mother's religious wish characterizes her as a caring daughter who respected her parents and religious traditions. Therefore, it characterizes her as moral.

Alfia *apa* continues to create coherence in her story by narrating two more accounts that contributed to her stepping on the road to piety, both accounts from a relatively distant past. She marks them by saying (in lines 19-20) that “there were the following two occurrences in my life.” The first one is Alfia *apa*'s helping a *babay* [Tat. ‘old man’] onto the bus (lines 20-34) and a dream that follows (lines 34-42). The significance of this account is in both its meaning and form. Alfia *apa* interprets the



dream following her kind gesture toward the old Tatar man (who was also a religious authority at the time) as an important sign related to her mother's dying wish to make prayers in her name, which he did. This is evident from Alfia *apa*'s statement in lines 42-43: "And so, naturally, when I woke up, I understood why, right?" where Alfia *apa* refers to the reason she saw the dream, without actually stating it. The form in which Alfia *apa* presents the story—with detailed descriptions and dialogue—also contributes to the richness of the account. Finally, the significance of this account is also in the fact that its protagonist, Alfia *apa*, is a highly moral person. She is moral not just because she helped the old man, but because she "did it and forgot about it" (lines 33-34). She probably would not have remembered it had it not been for the dream, which points to the generosity, sincerity, and morality of the protagonist's character. Not distancing herself from the protagonist allows the narrator to make a connection with the protagonist: Alfia *apa* was and is a moral person.

Having finished narrating the first occurrence, Alfia *apa* marks it by saying "Ok, So that's one dream" (line 43) and immediately moves on to describing the next non-contradictory account that contributed to her piety and to her piety story's coherence:

*Alfia apa's story – segment # 2:*

- A: 44. Then there was another occurrence in my life, which also took place the year  
45. my mom died. I go home from work. Well, back then, if you lived here, you would  
46. know...
- L: 47. Yes, I remember the Soviet times.
- A: 48. There was nothing [in the stores]. So, they used to sell beef ribs. They would sell  
49. them in a cafeteria. [We] would stand in line. Do you remember there were these  
50. meshed grocery bags?
- L: 51. Yes, yes, yes.
- A: 52. So, I was carrying [the ribs] home in a plastic bag inside the meshed bag. There  
53. was an old Russian woman who lived in our apartment building. I no longer  
54. remember her name. I was only 29. And so she is sitting—it turned out she was  
55. not receiving a pension—there were old ladies then who were not entitled to a

56. social pension. So, she says: “Oh, where did you buy these ribs? They would  
 57. make a nice soup!” Those ribs were cheap then, but impossible to buy. I thought,  
 58. oh gosh, we even buy meat from the market. But for her [the ribs were] important,  
 59. so I gave her the whole bag. We used to live on the fifth floor, and she lived on the  
 60. ground floor. So she says: “Your mom died recently. May she rest in peace.” And  
 61. while I was walking up the stairs, I heard her pray. That night I see a dream. My  
 62. mom, she is so happy, and she says: “*Kizim* [Tat. ‘my daughter’], you sent me a  
 63. jacket. It’s black, but still it’s so nice, so warm!” What does it mean? It means that  
 64. they know everything about our deeds here.<sup>141</sup> I started thinking about it. We used  
 65. to live in a one-bedroom apartment, I was in line for [a bigger] apartment.<sup>142</sup>

L: 66. When was all that?

A: 67. It was in the 1980s. I was waiting for an apartment. Now they want to give it upon  
 68. Moscow’s approval, now they don’t. It just wouldn’t work out. So, I stopped by a  
 69. mosque—I was drawn there after those dreams. There were signs. Although up to  
 70. this day, I am trying to talk my sisters into [believing], but they have not turned  
 71. yet.

The fact that Alfia *apa* marks the second account as related to the first one, by putting it in the same time frame and context (lines 44-45), indicates that the second account is narrated with the same purpose: to create a continuity and coherence in Alfia *apa*’s life story as a token of the narrator’s coherent, and thus her moral, character. The second account mirrors the first one in many aspects even though they are both “occurrences” (line 44), events that could not have been purposefully planned by her. Both events (a) happen within the first year of Alfia *apa*’s mother’s death (line 44); (b) take place when Alfia *apa* goes to work (the first account) or from work (the second account, line 45); (c) involve Alfia *apa*’s impromptu kind gestures toward an older person who happens to be religiously observant and poorer than Alfia *apa*’s family; (d) followed by dreams of her happy mother; (e) feature rich detail and dialogue; (f) prompt Alfia *apa* to think about their significance (line 63) and ascribe religious meaning to them

<sup>141</sup> By “here” Alfia *apa* means life on earth (as opposed to afterlife).

<sup>142</sup> During the Soviet time, the government distributed apartments free of charge to a certain segment of the population. There were huge waiting lists, and one could be on a waiting list from a couple of years to several decades, depending on a combination of factors.

(lines 63-64); and (g) portray Alfia *apa* as a caring individual, and thus highly moral, without much effort on the part of the protagonist to be one. Finally, Alfia *apa* treats these events not as individual unrelated occurrences, but as interdependent and significant to her piety, evident in the opening of Alfia *apa*'s narrative of a third account (waiting for an apartment): "So, I stopped by a mosque—I was drawn there after those dreams. There were signs" (lines 68-69). As a result, these two accounts are not only noncontradictory, but surprisingly similar by the narrator's own estimation.

The significance of these accounts is further evident in Alfia *apa*'s comment on them, when we resumed our conversation after it was interrupted by the teacher's arrival and the mosque lesson. Alfia *apa* picked up her narrative with the following summary: "So, there were these signs. I began to believe. Of course, I was far from the faith. But I began to believe that people die and come alive because my mom appeared in my dreams so vividly and with such signs." Alfia *apa*'s statement may seem contradictory because, in one breath, she says that she began to believe but was far from the faith. However, this contradiction is clarified at the end of Alfia *apa*'s account of yet another occurrence that contributed to her path to piety: her narrative about receiving a state-subsidized apartment she had been waiting for and eventually received.

She begins the third account in lines 64-69 of the last excerpt when she talks about waiting for a bigger apartment and uncertainty surrounding the situation with it. In the absence of a private housing market<sup>143</sup> during the Soviet period, a worker was entitled to a state-subsidized apartment (or to a bigger apartment if the family had outgrown an existing one, which was Alfia *apa*'s case). One, however, had to wait for it for years or

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<sup>143</sup> A rare exception was so called cooperative apartments ("*kooperativnye kvartiry*") that one could buy for a full-market price.

even decades and was ultimately at the mercy of those in charge. Alfia *apa* continued the account with a narrative of going to a mosque to give alms with hopes to solve the apartment situation:

*Alfia apa's story – segment # 3:*

[portion omitted]

- A: 72. So, I had to solve the housing question. And I was solving it myself. We had a one  
73. bed-room apartment. [ . . . ] I went to the Märjani mosque to see an *abıstay* [Tat.  
74. 'female religious authority']. [She was] very pleasant, educated. And I tell her that  
75. there was no luck in my getting an apartment. She says: "Do you believe in the  
76. Almighty? Do you recite *namaz* [Tat. 'ritual prayer']?" "No." "You need to carry  
77. out the *Korban* [Tat. 'animal sacrifice'] ritual<sup>144</sup> in order to get the apartment." So,  
78. I ordered the *Korban* ceremony, and it was carried out. It happened to be the  
79. Festival of the Sacrifice, the end of August. She helped me; I bought it; she gave  
80. me addresses, and I gave away all the meat from the sacrifice. It was right before I  
81. received an apartment. When I came to those addresses, I was so surprised to see  
82. women with no legs, others just after a surgery, some with many many kids, and  
83. things like that. And so I gave away the meat, and in December I got the  
84. apartment. It was at the end of August, so if you count, I got the apartment after  
85. four months.
- L: 86. What year was that?
- A: 87. It was 1989. My mom passed away in 1979, and I got the apartment in ten  
88. years. It wasn't right away. It was ten years without faith. I believed in God:  
89. *Bismillyahi-rahmanir-rahim. Allahu Akbar.*<sup>145</sup> And when I got the apartment, I  
90. really started believing in God. I was thinking a lot, and realized that I must learn  
91. to recite *namaz* [Tat. 'ritual prayer']. But back then there were no books,  
92. remember, Liliya? So I bought somewhere a Xeroxed copy of *namaz*. It contained  
93. a lot of errors, but I did not know.

On the surface, Alfia *apa*'s decision to go to the mosque (a spiritual place) to solve a housing problem (a worldly issue) may seem contradictory and may raise questions about the integrity of her character. However, I argue that, if interpreted within the socio-historical context at hand, it indicates quite the opposite. During the Soviet era, the only way one could expedite the process of getting free housing was through

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<sup>144</sup> Alfia *apa* is talking about the sacrifice of a livestock animal during the Muslim Holiday known among Tatars as *Korban Bayram* ("Eid-ul-Adha" in Arabic), which honors Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son as an act of worship and obedience to God. Giving away the sacrificial meat as charity is considered *Sunnah* [Ar. 'normative conduct based on the Prophet Muhammad's example'].

<sup>145</sup> Arabic phrases translated as "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful" and "God is the Greatest" respectively and used by Muslims during formal prayers and in daily interactions as a form of "informal" worship.

powerful connections or by bribing the appropriate officials in charge. The fact that Alfia *apa* did not do either (because she says “I was solving it [the housing question] by myself” (line 72)) points on the one hand, to her powerlessness in front of the system, but, on the other hand, to the presence of faith in her heart. As the Soviet state of atheism resulted in people’s losing religious knowledge, it was common among Tatars to turn to elders with their spiritual and worldly needs. As the only ones who preserved the Muslim religious tradition even if often in a vernacular form,<sup>146</sup> older Tatars who possessed some religious knowledge often acted as figures of religious authority and mediators between Allah and people. While, in the context of the post-Soviet religious revival practicing Muslim Tatars stress the importance of a personal appeal to God and frown on the practice, it is still not uncommon to witness non-practicing Tatars stop by a mosque and ask a *mullah* [Tat./Ar. ‘Muslim clergy’]<sup>147</sup> to recite a prayer in someone’s name or pray for a positive outcome in a private matter. Therefore, Alfia *apa*’s decision to go to a mosque to seek help with the housing problem was not unusual.

In the narrative above, Alfia *apa* presents an account that is both accidental on the surface, and yet a formative experience for her road to piety. It is accidental because it is not directly related to the other two occurrences Alfia *apa* talked about. It is formative because after following the *abystai*’s advice, which resulted in the successful resolution of the housing problem, Alfia *apa* admits that she “really started believing in God” (line 89-90). She precedes that by saying that “it was ten years without faith” (line 88). I propose that when Alfia *apa* states that she was “far from faith” and that she lived “ten

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<sup>146</sup> Mukhametshin (2009) suggests that the Russian colonial rule resulted in the merger of ethnic (Tatar) traditions and religious (Muslim) practices, further intensified by the Soviet state’s policy of atheism, which led to vernacularization of local Muslim practice and knowledge.

<sup>147</sup> Today, the term is mostly used to refer to an older generation of Muslim clergy. The younger generation prefer to be referred to as “*khäzrät*” [Tat./Ar. ‘Muslim clergy’].

years without faith” (line 88), she does not mean she was an atheist. What she means is that, as many other Tatars at the time, she was not a practicing Muslim. This is evident in her statement: “I believed in God: **Bismillyahi-rahmanir-rahim. Allahu Akbar**” (line 89) where Alfia *apa* illustrates the kind of faith that she had: its observance was limited to the few Muslim phrases she knew, which was typical for the majority of Tatars at the time. She further makes it clear that it was the *abystai*’s question about *namaz*, combined with the successful resolution of the housing problem, that prompted her to think about the way she believed (line 90). The fact that Alfia *apa* links the emergence of strong faith (lines 90-91) with the decision to recite *namaz* points to the evolution, and thus continuity, of her Muslim piety, not to a jump from an absolute absence of faith to believing.

This is further evidenced in the rest of Alfia *apa*’s narrative (not provided here in full due to space limitations). As she continued her story, Alfia *apa* conveyed that while she learned the elements of the prayer then, she did not begin performing it until several years later, due to not having an opportunity to find out how to put the elements together in the correct way. Similarly to her narrative pattern above, Alfia *apa* describes an opportunity to learn the prayer from a relative as what could be considered an accident: she happened to visit the relative who happened to be reciting *namaz* at the time of Alfia *apa*’s visit. The fact that Alfia *apa* credits Allah with this and the other three occurrences in her life is evident from her saying: “Apparently, **Allah tūgalā** [Tat. ‘God, the Exalted’] Himself led me to this.” She further explained that her learning how to recite *namaz* coincided with a serious problem in her family, and thus the prayer was Allah’s way to

prepare her how to deal with it: “*Allah tägalü* [Tat. ‘God, the Exalted’] probably helped me the most. I then firmly stood for *namaz*.”<sup>148</sup>

As evident from Alfia *apa*’s narrative, while the multiple accounts of her path to piety may initially have seemed to the protagonist (Alfia *apa* then) unrelated to one another, they are later perceived by the narrator (Alfia *apa* now) as a continuous journey to piety, made possible by *Allah tägalü*. Thus, coherence and continuity in Alfia *apa*’s narrative, life, and character are created not only through the richness of account (by going back in time and a combination of multiple noncontradictory accounts), but also through positioning the narrative within the coherence system (religious system in this case) that would be understood and shared by her audience: her daughter, her friends, me, and other practicing Muslim Tatar women. Ultimately, for Alfia *apa* and other practicing Muslim Tatar women, coherence in their lives, hearts, and character was indicative of the coherence of God’s design and his grace.

Alfia *apa*’s and Madina *apa*’s stories about their ways to Muslim piety are examples of what Snow & Malachuk (1983, 1984) refer to as a change in a universe of discourse. Such change presupposes a replacement of once secondary universe of discourse with a primary one, which is evident in the narrative strategies of biographical reconstruction of the past and attribution of a master narrative scheme. While Alfia *apa*’s path to piety was different from that of Madina *apa*, what united these women’s stories was the presence of coherence and continuity in their narratives, as a reflection of the kind of people that they are and the values that they hold: coherent and thus moral.

Drawing on Linde’s (1993) catalogue of rhetorical strategies that speakers utilize to create adequate causality and continuity (as prerequisites for coherence), I argue that in

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<sup>148</sup> “To stand for *namaz*” means to begin reciting the Muslim five daily prayer on a regular basis.

Madina *apa*'s narrative coherence is rooted in her moral character. Even when she was a non-practicing Muslim, Madina *apa*'s belief in the Tatar purity and her continuous attempts to find it in a Soviet, and later post-Soviet, societies plagued by problems characterize her as moral. Similarly, Alfia *apa*'s story also portrays her as a moral person, not only because of the actions she takes on the road to piety, but also because of coherence and continuity achieved in her narrative through temporal depth and multiple noncontradictory accounts.

Finally, both women's belief that their road to piety was made possible by the grace of *Allah tügalä* [Tat. 'God, the Exalted'], allows the women to locate their narratives and, ultimately selves, within the value system shared by other Muslim Tatars. Such sharing of beliefs—in a narrative, in the presence of other women—not only enhances coherence, but also resolves any potential questions about the older Muslim Tatar women's past and their present-day commitment to Muslim piety. Ultimately, it allows the women to experience personal transformation in the act of story-sharing and provides the audience with a repertoire of paths to Muslim piety from which to draw.



## CHAPTER 6

### VOICING AN INVITATION TO MUSLIM PIETY THROUGH PIETY STORIES

In this chapter, I introduce and analyze another culturally specific function of piety stories, the function of *dagvat*<sup>149</sup> (from Arabic “*da’wah*”<sup>150</sup>), an invitation or call to Islam and Muslim piety. By using one practicing Tatar Muslim woman’s piety story as a case study, I illustrate how, in the process of sharing piety stories, Muslim women engage in an oral, indirect form of *dagvat*, the purpose of which is to invite the interlocutor(s) to consider, and possibly share, the speaker’s system of belief and, ultimately, to step onto and stay on the road to piety. Hirschkind (2006) explains that, as an act that enables a Muslim to inspire others to pursue greater piety, *da’wah* becomes a collective moral duty that is binding on Muslims as members of the *Ummah*, the global Muslim community (p. 109). As a form of *da’wah*, then, piety stories represent a form of moral discourse, and their sharing is an act of piety. Finally, I propose that, by engaging in *dagvat* through the communicative act of storytelling, Muslim Tatar women voice their agency by advocating for a pious lifestyle that they see as a means to a personal and, ultimately, social transformation.

In this chapter, I first define *da’wah* and explain its significance as a moral, collective action incumbent upon Muslims as members of the global Muslim community. I then describe a variety of ways *da’wah* is understood and practiced among present-day Muslim Tatars, showing how a piety story serves as a discursive form of *da’wah*. Using a piety story of a practicing Muslim Tatar woman (Mariam *apa*) as a case study, I illustrate how she uses piety stories (her own and others’) to nurture the moral state of multiple

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<sup>149</sup> *Dagvat* is an English transliteration of the Russian version (“*dažvam*”) of the Arabic borrowing.

<sup>150</sup> Also transliterated from Arabic into English as *da’wa* or *dawah*.

communities she belongs to (from her immediate family to the *Ummah*) by encouraging personal transformation through Muslim piety. I proceed to examine rhetorical strategies Mariam *apa* utilizes in her piety story in order to deliver *dagvat*. One of them is didactic stories—stories about other people’s lives—that serve as real life examples in support of a moral point. Next, I illustrate how Mariam *apa*’s meta-comments about doing *dagvat* through her own piety story highlight her familiarity with the practice and ability to utilize it to guide the listener onto the road to piety. I conclude that, as a moral discursive act that provides Muslim Tatar women with an opportunity to invite the listener to Muslim piety, *dagvat* in the form of piety stories becomes a source of agency for personal and social transformation.

### **Da’wah as Moral, Collective Action**

The notion of *da’wah*, as an invitation or call to Islam, appears in the Qur’an and other Muslim classical religious texts. Its original meaning refers to “God’s way of bringing believers to faith and the means by which prophets call individuals and communities back to God” (“Dawah,” 2003). Over time, the concept acquired multiple meanings, ranging from an individual activity, such as prayer, to religious political and social movements of the twentieth century, such the Da’wah movement in Egypt.<sup>151</sup> Contemporary discussions on *da’wah* center around questions on whether *da’wah* can be considered a missionary/proselytizing practice similar to the one found in Western Christianity and on the means whereby *da’wah* is/should be carried out.

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<sup>151</sup> Racijs’ (2004) dissertation discusses the multiple nature of *da’wah*; Muslim scholars, Sakr (1997) for example, also emphasize the multiple nature of *da’wah*. Mahmood (2005) and Hirschkind (2006) provide insights into the twentieth century *Da’wah* movement in Egypt.

Relevant to my inquiry is Hirschkind's (2006) observation that one of *da'wah*'s early meanings, which remains key to contemporary Islamic thought, is "that of a duty, incumbent upon some or all members of the Islamic community, to actively encourage fellow Muslims in the pursuance of greater piety in all aspects of their lives" (p. 109). Therefore, *da'wah* is a *social* or *communal* activity, not just an act of an individual faith and conviction. Through his analysis of cassette sermons in contemporary Egypt, Hirschkind (2006), for example, explains how *da'wah* becomes a moral and communal act at the discursive level in the context of secular Egypt's Islamic revival:<sup>152</sup>

To assume the position of a *da'iya* (one who undertakes *da'wa*) is to adopt the rhetorical stance of a member of the Islamic *umma*<sup>153</sup> acting on behalf of that particular historical project (and thus not simply as an individual concerned for his or her own moral conduct)...*Da'wah* is constituted whenever and wherever individuals enter into that form of discourse geared toward upholding or improving the moral condition of the collective . . . . (p. 116)

In other words, Hirschkind implies that *da'wah* is not simply a type of moral discourse – it is moral action. Furthermore, because every Muslim is simultaneously a member of a local *and* global community of Muslims (the *Ummah*), his or her conduct is reflective and constitutive of the *Ummah* and is never completely personal. It is bound not only by the tenets of the faith, but also by one's membership in the *Ummah*.

### **Da'wah in the Local (Tatar) Context**

My analysis of Mariam *apa*'s narrative below illustrates that *da'wah* also serves these functions among Muslim Tatar practicing women and their piety stories in particular, in the context of the Tatar Muslim Revival. Growing up in Tatarstan in the

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<sup>152</sup> Hirschkind (2006) defines Islamic Revival in Egypt as follows: "While this movement encompasses a wide variety of phenomena, from political parties to underground militant organizations, in Egypt its broadest section has always remained grounded in grassroots efforts to revitalize Islamic forms of knowledge, pedagogy, comportment, and sociability" (p. 6).

<sup>153</sup> "Community" (Arabic).

1990s at the peak of Tatars' ethno-religious revival, I witnessed multiple instances of what could be considered *da'wah*—ranging from Friday mosque sermons to an older Tatar woman's request that her granddaughter wear longer skirts, avoid sleeveless tops and say “*Allah birsa*” [Tat. ‘God willing’] when making plans. I argue that the latter were not necessarily conceived of and carried out as carefully planned acts of *da'wah* (such as a mosque sermon, for example), but were part of the daily practices that indirectly serve the *da'wah* function of maintaining the healthy moral state of the *Ummah*.

The Tatar word for *da'wah* is *däg'vat*<sup>154</sup> and is most likely an older Arabic borrowing that translates as a call to Islam. According to one of my interviewees, a practicing Muslim Tatar woman in her early seventies who became an *abistay*, a female religious authority, after she retired, the term and its religious meanings were once actively used by Tatars (her parents' and grandparents' generations), but became absent from an average Tatar's lexicon during the Soviet times. However, as a result of the post-Soviet Muslim revival and re-emergence of practices associated with *da'wah*, the term is gradually making its way back. Moreover, its Russian version—*dagvat*<sup>155</sup>—is the one I repeatedly heard among practicing Muslims during my fieldwork. The Tatarstan-based Muslim newspaper *Umma*<sup>156</sup> conducted a text-message reader survey on “What is *dagvat* (a call to Islam) in your life?” [Ru. “Chto v vashei zhizni est' dagvat (prizyv k islamu)]?” The readers' responses reflect practicing Muslim Tatars' understanding of *da'wah* today:

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<sup>154</sup> Transliteration of the Tatar word “*дәгъват*”

<sup>155</sup> Transliteration of the Russian word “*дазват*”; also spelled as “*da'ea*” and “*da'eam*” (Safiullina, 2005, p. 78).

<sup>156</sup> The newspaper is endorsed by Tatarstan's Spiritual Muslim Board. Its title translates from Arabic as “Muslim community.” I accessed the survey online (<http://www.e-umma.ru/node/889>).

- “*Dagvat* is *adab* [Ar. ‘good manners, behavior’]. Good treatment of everyone and neat appearance” [Ru. “*Dagvat – adab. Khoroshee otnoshenie ko vsem i opriatnyi vneshnii vid.*”]
- “A call – is a story about Islam; it begins since childhood” [Ru. “*Prizyv – eto rasskaz ob islame, on nachinaetsia s detstva.*”]
- “The most important call is one’s own positive example.” [Ru. “*Samyi glavnyi prizyv – eto sobstvennyi polozhitel’nyi primer.*”]
- “I think one need not call [someone else to Islam], but one needs to simply answer questions [about Islam]; that’s all.” [Ru. “*Ya schitaiu, chto prizyvai’ nikogo ne nado, a prosto otvechat’ na voprosy.*”]

The readers’ responses suggest that, while the present-day concept of *dagvat* still denotes the basic notion of calling/inviting to Islam, it is being used in relation to a multitude of practices. The first response, for example, shows the close association between *dagvat* and being a good person through “good treatment of everyone” and observing “*adab*,” good manners, behavior. The third responder views “one’s own positive example” as an act of *dagvat*. Yet, the second response underlines the discursive side of *dagvat* as “a story about Islam.” Similarly, I argue that another example of a discursive act of *dagvat* is a personal narrative such as a piety story. The piety story analyzed below is a case in point.

#### **Case Study: Mariam *apa*’s Piety Story as a (Discursive) Act of *Da’wah***

The piety story analyzed in this chapter is a case study of *dagvat* in the form of personal narrative shared by Mariam *apa*, a self-identified half-Tatar, half-Uzbek

practicing Muslim woman in her late forties. By focusing on Mariam *apa*'s narrative, I illustrate the potential of piety stories to serve as a form of discourse designed to nurture the moral state of multiple communities the speaker belongs to—the family, the neighborhood, the town, the country, the *Ummah*—by encouraging personal transformation through Muslim piety. Emphasizing the importance of case studies that focus on an individual, Flueckiger (2006) and Peshkova (2013) argue that examining a culture at the level of an individual life provides a lens for looking at wider conditions and communities. Furthermore, while Mariam *apa*'s personality and story may come across as atypical or even idiosyncratic to those who exhibit a skeptical view towards Muslim piety (for example, non-observant Muslims or secularists), it is because they do not easily fit within the dominant structures and discourses and, as such, provide an opportunity for seeing what's beyond the surface (Okely, as cited in Flueckiger 2006, p. 24).

I interviewed Mariam *apa* over the course of three three-hour long conversations at the Mukhammadiia *medrese* in Kazan, where Mariam was a fourth-year extramural student. I chose Mariam *apa*'s story for a diversity of its rhetorical features that resemble a more direct form of *da'wah*, such as a *khutbah* [Ar. 'sermon'] and include citations from the Qur'an and *ahadith* [Ar. 'accounts of exemplary sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad'], didactic stories, and rhetorical questions that follow or precede moral points. By making Mariam *apa*'s narrative resemble the traditional form of *da'wah*, these rhetorical features demonstrate her mastery of *da'wah* and make moral points that she sets forth in her story more appealing. Moreover, several hours into our conversation, Mariam *apa* characterized her own narrative as *dagvat* intended for me and

punctuated the rest of her story with metatalk on various kinds of *dagvat* she had engaged in, being a practicing Muslim. In the process of introducing myself and telling her about myself and my research, I shared with Mariam *apa* that I had adopted some Muslim practices (such as the five daily prayer and the headscarf, for example) upon beginning my fieldwork in Kazan, only a couple of months before our meeting. Therefore, for Mariam *apa*, I was not an inexperienced Muslim whose *iman* [Ar./Tat. faith] needed to be protected, nurtured and cultivated.

Furthermore, a woman's piety rarely stopped with her and often affected her immediate family in multiple, sometimes unpredictable ways (as did the family affect her *iman*). As a result, in the process of sharing their piety stories women often asked and talked about immediate family members. In the course of our interaction, Mariam *apa* and I discussed our family members' attitudes toward faith and discovered that men in our families showed less interest in religion than women. This may be why, at some point in her narrative, Mariam *apa* told me a story about a Muslim Tatar friend who was concerned about religious differences in her marriage. Mariam *apa* encouraged the friend to deliver *dagvat* to her ethnic Russian non-practicing husband. As a point of comparison, Mariam *apa* weaved in a story about another family where both husband and wife were practicing Muslims and lived happily. "Indeed, you see," Mariam *apa* told me, "people are happy in Islam." She proceeded with a comment on the importance of *dagvat* in a Muslim's life:

A Muslim must not live quietly, as it happens, if a person nearby doesn't know about faith. One should try to deliver [religious knowledge] because, for example, my Russian neighbor might say on the Judgment day: 'And she was my neighbor; she surely knew, why didn't she tell me?' There is a **hadith** [Ar. 'an account of exemplary sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad'] about a place that Allah ordered the angels to destroy because there were non-believers [there]. They [the angels] saw there

one righteous man, so they came back and said: ‘We could not [destroy the place] because there is a righteous man there.’ Allah said: ‘Begin with him because he knows but hasn’t delivered [religious knowledge] to others.’ You see, knowledge, it bears down, so that you, it is a mission. What is this knowledge for? Knowledge is light, so that it must enlighten someone. Not just that you [alone] are enlightened, and you see everything.

While in the above passage Mariam *apa* uses a Russian (and thus non-Muslim) person as an example of someone who could benefit from *dagvat*, her opening sentence—“if a person nearby doesn’t know about faith”—indicates the importance of *dagvat* to everyone, including fellow Muslims, as I positioned myself.

Mariam *apa* was not the only woman I interviewed who, in the process of sharing her piety story with me, simultaneously engaged in *dagvat* and commented on its importance. Malika, another practicing Muslim Tatar woman in her early thirties (whose piety story is analyzed in chapter 8) also commented on the importance of *dagvat* in the course of our conversation—without directly referring to the practice—in the following way:

The religion encourages us to...we need to tell...we need to, sort of, correctly carry [religious knowledge] to people, so that... no one...everyone has information about Allah. So that [when you are] before God on the Judgment day, he wouldn’t ask you: “Why did you keep silent? Why didn’t you speak?” So, um, the human-, the humanity is one community; it’s one body...and you can’t just preserve purity this way and not strive so that those next to you live the same way, you see, it’s impossible. So a Muslim, any Muslim, he<sup>157</sup> incites neighbors in his own way, everyone in a different way ac-, according to his personality and knowledge, but everyone has this desire.

Just like Mariam *apa*, Malika considers it a duty “to carry [religious knowledge] to people.” By referring to the humanity as “one community,” “one body,” Malika invokes the Muslim notion of *ummah*—what Hirschkind (2006) refers to as “fundamentally a

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<sup>157</sup> Third person singular masculine pronoun “he” is used to agree with the singular masculine noun “Muslim.” Third person singular masculine is often used in Russian to describe a non-specific situation, and it is particularly used in formal speech. It does not necessarily imply the speaker’s preference of one gender over the other.



moral space” (p. 117)—that presupposes collective (vs. personal) accountability that is binding on all members of the community. Perhaps because both Mariam *apa* and Malika had been practicing Muslims for an extended period of time and possessed advanced religious knowledge, their awareness and mastery of *dagvat* are particularly manifest in their narratives.

While Malika’s and Mariam *apa*’s narratives provide a commentary on *da’wah*, I argue that piety stories can serve as *da’wah* even if their content is limited to a detailed account of a woman’s path to Islam and does not address the question of *da’wah* in any way. A piety storyteller can engage into *da’wah* by way of “engaging the listener’s heart.” Hirschkind’s (2006) insights into sensory affect of Muslim sermon listening are particularly useful here. He observes:

From early in the development of Islam, sermon audition has been identified as essential to the cultivation of the sensitive heart that allows one to hear and embody in practice the ethical sensibilities undergirding moral action. Beyond the cognitive task of learning rules and procedures, listeners hone those affective-volitional dispositions, ways of the heart that both attune the heart to God’s word and incline the body toward moral action. (p. 9)

While a Muslim piety story is not identical to a Muslim sermon (past or present) in its purpose, content, form, mode of delivery, or setting, I argue that a piety story is also capable of “cultivating of the sensitive heart,” by allowing the speaker to re-create—and the audience, to share in—the speaker’s deeply personal experience on the path to Muslim piety. In the course of my fieldwork, I have not only observed the affective impact of sharing of piety stories that would orient the listener’s body, through her heart, to a moral action, but I have experienced it myself first hand. A practicing woman’s narrative about her donning the headscarf was often one of the most affective parts of her piety story, as it referred to a moral action that was not easy to commit to (as the

teacher's narrative in chapter 4 illustrates). Such a story could often contribute to the listener's donning of the headscarf, or encourage her to keep it on despite the difficulties associated with it.

My conversation with Mariam *apa* took place in the presence of Raisa *apa*, a practicing Tatar Muslim woman in her fifties who was a *medrese* worker and Mariam *apa*'s acquaintance. While I made every effort to conduct interviews in a private setting, with just me and the interviewee present, sometimes the interviewee would invite someone else to listen to our conversation or simply would not mind if another person remained in the same room. I propose that sometimes such occurrences were not simple coincidences but were reflective of the interviewee's desire for a certain type of interaction: her intention to deliver *dagvat*—through her piety story—to someone else besides me. For example, Malika, a practicing Tatar Muslim woman in her early thirties whom I quoted above, brought her non-practicing Tatar cousin to our interview. During my interview with Mariam *apa* at the Mukhammadiia *medrese*, Raisa *apa* happened to be on duty in the same vicinity. At the time, Mariam *apa* was recalling a dream<sup>158</sup> that she interpreted as a message from Allah<sup>159</sup> to not be afraid of anyone but Him. Having noticed Raisa *apa* nearby, Mariam invited her to join in our conversation by saying: "This will be interesting for you to hear as well, as a lesson." This invitation revealed Mariam *apa*'s intention to deliver *dagvat* to me and Raisa *apa*, a Tatar woman who became a practicing Muslim only recently.

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<sup>158</sup> Mariam *apa* considered her dreams to be messages from God; in the course of our three interview sessions, Mariam recollected many dreams and provided her interpretations of them. At some point in the interview she admitted that she "probably came to Islam through dreams."

<sup>159</sup> Unless otherwise indicated in a transcript, Mariam *apa* used the term "Allah" throughout her narrative.

Below I present the data segment that was part of Mariam *apa*'s piety story. In this segment, Mariam *apa* engages in *dagvat* by openly speaking about the benefit of religious knowledge:

*Mariam apa's story – segment #1:*

- M: 1. And the greatest knowledge, the best knowledge—I understood it later by the age  
2. of forty—that we say “Allah is great!” and so knowledge from Him is also the  
3. greatest. Even if you have a hundred degrees, they will not substitute this  
4. knowledge for you. If you have this knowledge, you are with Allah. Allah will  
5. open all roads for you. The main thing, I am saying, is you give your all, and you  
6. will receive the quality and reliability.<sup>160</sup> Anyone can err; anyone can deceive  
7. somewhere something, but there is no such thing about Allah: He never errs and  
8. He never deceives. He had promised, He says: “If you are with me, no one,” you  
9. know, “even if the entire world would want to destroy you, it won’t be able to if  
10. I,” He says, “am for you. If [I] am against,” just try to say something that  
11. wouldn’t be liked by Allah, “the entire world would want to protect you, but no  
12. one will be able to,” it is said. And, indeed, this is true. Everyone has trials, and  
13. every day, if there is faith in [one’s] soul, every person gets through these trials.  
14. And faith helps to go through gracefully. And you, so that, not being afraid of  
15. anything, but being afraid of Allah, and you are getting through these trials.  
16. Allah—bam—throws you such a reward, such gifts. I know from people’s lives.

While the beginning of Mariam *apa*'s narrative may seem random and directly unrelated to her own story, it refers back to a previous conversation she and I had had. As we were getting to know each other, Mariam *apa* had asked me about my education and the academic degree I was working on. Later on, I expressed to her my sentiment about the importance of secular education. When in line 3 Mariam *apa* states: “Even if you have a hundred degrees, they will not substitute this knowledge for you,” she uses the second person pronoun “you” not only as a rhetorical device to address her imaginative

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<sup>160</sup> Mariam *apa* is referring to the dream she had shared with Raisa *apa* and me. In the dream, she and her husband were at a market buying goods in bulk at a store for further resale (Mariam and her husband traded goods for a living). The storeowner had promised her husband that he would sell them the best quality goods at the lowest price if they bought in bulk. They did exactly that, and receive a great deal, despite another trader’s efforts’ to frighten them and sabotage the deal. Mariam interpreted her dream to her husband in a religious sense: “‘so, everywhere, and in the Qur’ran as well, they say that those who are in trade with *Allah* those will not be at a loss, that precisely this kind of trade is profitable.’ And, indeed, only Allah has the best quality [goods] and the cheapest, but you have to give it all, all your money. How simple, isn’t it?”

audience, but also to address me personally to invite me to think about the importance of religious knowledge. She continues her *dagvat* by quoting Allah in lines 8-12, which points to Mariam *apa*'s knowledge of the Qur'an and her ability to draw on it as part of *dagvat*. According to Mariam *apa*, religious knowledge is a foundation of faith and one's commitment to God. If such commitment is without hesitation, it will be rewarded by *Allah*.

Mariam *apa* supports her argument by not only quoting God himself, but also by using other women's piety stories as "real life" evidence when she begins re-telling someone else's piety story by saying "I know from people's lives" (line 16). In the data segment below, Maria *apa* continues her *dagvat* by, first, relaying and commenting on a piety-story-sharing experience she had engaged in and then re-telling the piety story in support of her sentiment. Raisa *apa*, who had briefly left the conversation, returns and asks permission to join us again.

*Mariam apa's story – segment #2:*

M: 17. Just yesterday, I was sitting and speaking with a girl. Well, it's interesting to talk,  
 18. after all. I quickly pop a story; she is sitting: "Wow, goosebumps!" A story of  
 19. people with Islam. I say: "And now you tell me." Well, I understand that she also  
 20. knows such things. She says: "You know..." You may have already heard. One  
 21. woman came to this girl to study, and—she was not all that young—she worked  
 22. at a bank. And, while working at the bank, she came to a mosque to study. "And  
 23. I," she said, "once noticed that she began to take the headscarf off when she  
 24. comes.<sup>161</sup> I thought she just wanted to adjust [it]; I did not understand that she is  
 25. out on the street without the headscarf. I wanted to adjust: 'Let me see, let me see,  
 26. they will see you, let me tie it nicely for you.' And she says: 'Oh no, heavens, no!  
 27. I don't wear the headscarf when I am out.' I," she says, "we talked for a long  
 28. time, that 'it's Allah, that it's a command from Allah; why should you be afraid  
 29. of people?' And she began to explain: 'I work for a bank, and I will have, well,  
 30. [they] fire me'." And she said: "I said that Allah is the giving one; don't be afraid;  
 31. [one] should only be afraid of Allah." And so this is what happened some time  
 32. later...Evidently, she, having listened to—the other one must have managed to  
 33. deliver [her message] convincingly—and that one started to wear the headscarf at

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<sup>161</sup> Evidently, Mariam *apa* misspoke here. She most likely meant to say "leaves."

34. work also. She chose “what’s more important for me?” And her boss came and  
35. called her. [He] says: “Choose either Allah or work.” And she chose, of course,  
36. Allah. She cried, she said.
- R: 37. May I listen in? (*(listens from a distance)*)  
[portion omitted]
- M: 38. And so, when she chose Allah, she cried, you know, but she had to leave her job.  
39. “And,” she says, “there was such a surprise. I am out walking,” she says, “in a  
40. month or two, and there is a familiar face in a **hijab** [Ar. ‘headscarf’], in a  
41. headscarf a woman [is walking] toward me. ‘**Assalyamu aleikum** [Ar. ‘Peace be  
42. upon you’],<sup>162</sup> we said hellos. So what happened in a short period of time. She  
43. lost her job and came to Kazan. She had such a salary, about twenty thousand,<sup>163</sup>  
44. at the bank...
- L: 45. It probably wasn’t in Kazan?
- M: 46. No, but not far way, but for that area it was a big salary, twenty thousand.
- L: 47. In Tatarstan?
- M: 48. Yes. And she got a job as a sales associate here at a store. Just a hundred rubles  
49. per day. Imagine, it’s only three thousand, but in return she is with Allah. And,  
50. she says, that it so happened that during such a short period of time she got  
51. married. Her husband is 38 years old, as it turns out, he is a Muslim. And he is an  
52. architect himself, so they live in an apartment building now; he drafted it himself.  
53. She has such a huge, chic apartment, she says. And she almost monthly travels to  
54. Turkey, travels here and there; her own wardrobe...
- R: 55. God gave all this, you see.
- M: 56. Yes. In a short period of time. It was just necessary to make a choice, that’s all.  
57. And before that, I told her a story that I had read in the *Kiybla*<sup>164</sup> magazine. Do  
58. you know [it]?

<sup>162</sup> Muslim greeting.

<sup>164</sup> “*Kıybla*” is a Tatar form of the Arabic word “*qibla*,” which refers to the direction of the sacred Muslim place, *Kaaba*, in which direction Muslims turn during prayer. Mariam *apa* is referring to a Tatar-language Muslim magazine.

Muslim magazine *Kiybla*, which indicates the presence of piety stories in print media.<sup>165</sup> Furthermore, by saying that she understands that her interlocutor “also knows such things” (19-20) and by asking me if I have already heard the story she is about to tell, Mariam *apa* indirectly comments on the popularity of the story sharing practice. Finally, by asking her interlocutor to share a story, having told one herself, Mariam *apa* invites the other woman to participate in the *dagvat* experience not only as its recipient, but as a *da'iyah*, the one delivering *da'wah*.

By initiating such role reversal, Mariam *apa* creates a reciprocal relationship that forges solidarity and enables her listener to begin enacting Muslim piety without a delay, in her own moment of story telling, right then and there. In his analysis of cassette sermons in Egypt, Hirschkind (2006) draws on Wilberg’s definition of communication as “a collective performance, founded upon active dynamic for which both the speaker and the listener are responsible” (p. 23). Based on this notion, I argue that the story sharing practice provides an opportunity for collective *da'wah* where the listener’s perception—her ability to listen with her heart—is as integral to the experience as the *da'iyah*’s ability to cultivate the sensitive heart.

The piety story that Mariam *apa* retells in lines 20-54 reflects a typical “before and after” pattern of a conversion narrative. It focuses on one’s initial interest in religion, a turning point (often accompanied by dramatic trials and tribulations), and the outcome of the change, in this instance a “happy end,” which supported the main message of Mariam *apa*’s *dagvat*: if you commit to God, He will generously reward you. In addition, the piety story contains elements of direct *dagvat*, delivered by Mariam *apa*’s interlocutor

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<sup>165</sup> Muslim print and digital media in Tatar and Russian are abundant with piety stories, as I discovered during my fieldwork.

to the story's heroine when the former learned that the young woman was afraid to wear her headscarf outside the mosque (lines 27-28; 30-31). While in this instance Mariam sets off her acquaintance's speech with "she says" (line 27) and "she said" (line 30), at the time of our conversation I perceived the utterances as Mariam *apa*'s indirect *dagvat* to me, especially because the sentiment resonated with her earlier message on religious knowledge and commitment to God (lines 1-16). Finally, the fact that Mariam shares her acquaintance's moral stance on the story and further voices it as *dagvat* to Raisa *apa* and me is evident from Mariam *apa*'s final comment. When in reaction to the story Raisa *apa* says: "God gave her all this, you see," Mariam *apa* responds: "Yes. In a short period of time. It was just necessary to make a choice, that's all" (line 55), thereby summarizing the moral point of the story.

### **Dagvat in the Form of Didactic Stories Within Piety Story**

While Mariam *apa* shared another woman's piety story by summarizing it clearly and concisely in a linear fashion, her own narrative about her path to Islam was very circumlocutory. It could be due to the fact that I met with Mariam *apa* three times, for three hours at a time, so Mariam *apa* relayed a large amount of information to me. But it could also be due to the fact that, in the process of sharing her piety story, Mariam *apa* was concerned not only with its content and factuality, but also with its impact and purpose: to deliver *dagvat* to me. From the very beginning Mariam *apa*'s narrative was filled with multiple stories not only about her own life, but also about the lives of her family members and friends, despite my continuous questions about Mariam *apa*'s own life. This was one of the reasons why, not satisfied with what I learned about Mariam

*apa*'s own religious experience during our first conversation, I asked her to meet with me again.

However, a closer examination of Mariam *apa*'s narrative later on led me to realize that throughout her talk, Mariam *apa* relied on other people's stories as real life examples for a moral point she was trying to make and inviting me to consider. I argue that Mariam *apa* drew on these stories as a rhetorical strategy for delivering an indirect *dagvat* to me. As such, these micro-narratives within her own macro-narrative<sup>166</sup> become didactic stories. Commenting on *masalah*, didactic stories shared by Uzbek female spiritual leaders (*otinchalar*), Peshkova (2006) argues that these didactic stories provide models for social behavior that are considered morally appropriate within the local context. Moreover, female spiritual leaders perceive the telling of these stories as part of their moral obligation "to actively engage in the transformation of their lives, their family lives, and their communities into informed Muslims" (Peshkova, 2006, p. 179). Similarly, Mariam *apa* weaved in didactic stories within her piety story with the purpose of creating a moral impetus for her listeners' transformation as, first and foremost, members of the *Ummah*.

The excerpt below is an example of a brief story Mariam *apa* tells about her friend. She then follows the story with a moral point. Mariam *apa* weaved the story into a narrative thread about her family member who used to practice fortunetelling, which is considered *haram* [Ar. 'forbidden'] in Islam:

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<sup>166</sup> I draw here on Gergen (1994) who suggests: "*macronarratives* refer to accounts in which events span broad periods of time, while *micronarratives* relate events of brief duration" (p. 203).



*Mariam apa's story – segment # 3:*<sup>167</sup>

- M: 1. So, a girl friend of mine wanted to start a business with her husband, and a psychic  
2. said there wouldn't be any luck. They say, there wasn't any luck, indeed. Well,  
3. that's because you haven't asked from Allah. In Islam, they ask from Allah, and  
4. then Allah necessarily gives to the one who asked. And because you haven't asked,  
5. Allah gave the other one, and now you think: "Oh yeah, that [psychic] told the  
6. truth." You will go, run to her again next time since she tells the truth, it turns out.  
7. So, that's how it goes. It doesn't leave any hope, right?

Having summarized the story in lines 1-2, *Mariam apa* proceeds to emphasize the moral point exemplified by it: "In Islam, they ask from Allah, and then Allah necessarily gives to the one who asked" (lines 3-4). The brief story above does not describe *Mariam apa's own* religious experience per se. Instead, it reflects *Mariam apa's* system of belief—her moral stance—that she conveys through the story and invites her listener to consider. It is not only the content, but also the form of the narrative, that makes it both a didactic story and an instance of *dagvat*. When *Mariam apa* summarizes the key point of the story, she switches from the third person narrative to the second person, addressing her interlocutor directly, and thereby inviting her to think about the moral of the story (lines 3-6).

### **Performing *Dagvat* and Commenting About It**

While we routinely rely on storytelling to make sense of the world (Linde, 1993), what makes *Mariam apa's* narrative an instance of *dagvat* is the belief system—Islam—that she espouses and invites the listener to consider, as the excerpts above illustrates. In addition, half way into our first conversation, *Mariam apa* admitted that her narrative was partially *dagvat* to me. She had just finished telling me about a religious dream she had,

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<sup>167</sup> Because this segment did not follow the previous segment immediately, I started the line numbering anew. I followed this rule throughout the rest of the data segments in the chapter.

one of many spiritual dreams that she had had and considered important milestones in her spiritual development. In the dream, she saw the words of the *shahadah* [Arabic], the declaration of faith in the Islam,<sup>168</sup> spelled out in front of her eyes in Arabic, even though Mariam *apa* admitted that she did not know the Arabic letters at the time:

*Mariam apa's story – segment # 4:*

- M: 1. I would notice that all serious, meaningful dreams, they haunt me, and I begin to  
 2. search for something. Why is it so? I did not understand the meaning of the dream at  
 3. all, but now I know that **Allah tūgalū** [Tat. 'God, the Exalted'] gave me to learn  
 4. the meaning, so in the dark these letters, these words were spelled: "There is no god  
 5. but God, and Muhammad is His messenger." He illuminated the meaning of these  
 6. words for me. So, why was it positioned from the direction of Kibla?<sup>169</sup> There,  
 7. these **surahs** [Ar. 'Qur'anic chapters'] begin with the word "**Qul**!" [Ar. 'Say']  
 8. "Say!" Meaning that I am also ordered: "orient yourself in the direction of Kibla  
 9. and say, recite **namaz** [Tat. 'ritual prayer']" these words, right? And then, also, I  
 10. learned that when you say "**La ilaha illa'Llah**" [Ar. 'There is no other god, but  
 11. Allah'] ...I am telling you this as *dagvat*, a bit...on the one hand, right? You will  
 12. also understand through this that **Allah tūgalū** [Tat. 'God, the Exalted'] says that  
 13. on the Judgment Day, these sincerely spoken words "**La ilaha illa'Llah,**  
 14. **Muhammadur rasulu l-Lah,**" on the scale, when all our good deeds will be  
 15. weighted, they will be the heaviest. No matter what good deeds you may have  
 16. done, right, they, as it happens, will be the heaviest on the scale, heavier than  
 17. anything else. [Meaning] that we believe sincerely that there is one God, and  
 18. Muhammad is His messenger, right?

The excerpt above suggests not only Mariam *apa's* direct *dagvat* to met, but also the importance of dreams in her spiritual development. While analyzing the centrality of dream narratives among Evangelical Christian converts, Stromberg (1993) observes: "for many members of our society, a dream is a mystical phenomenon, something with a mysterious connection to everyday reality" and that a dream creates a setting where one can experience "normally unacceptable aspects of [her] own feelings and desires" by blending the canonical and metaphorical language (p. 62).

<sup>168</sup> In English, the *shahadah* translates as "There is no other god, but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger" and professes the oneness of God and acceptance of Muhammad as a Prophet.

<sup>169</sup> The direction of Muslim ritual prayer.

The importance of dreams in one's spiritual development is not limited to members of the Evangelical Christianity movement in the West. Commenting on the *daw'ah* practices of female members of the mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood (2005) describes one *daiyat*'s (one who deliver *da'wah*) urge "to serve God in *da'wa*, a calling that was repeatedly revealed to her in the form of a dream" (p. 92). Finally, exploring the significance of dreams in the context of the radical social change in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, Louw (2010) argues that dreams, their sharing, and interpretations become "a social riddle," a means by which the dreamer (and those involved in the dream) must decide where he or she can exercise free will, or what is out of his or her control and must be left to fate (p. 289). Therefore, while Mariam *apa*'s dream narratives may come across as mystical or supernatural, they are not considered to be out of the ordinary in the local context.

Mariam *apa* first explains the importance of dreams in her spiritual development (lines 1-2). She then interprets the dream she saw and, in the process, explains the meaning of the *shahadah*, partially reciting it (lines 4-10). She then admits (line 11) that: "I am telling you this as *dagvat*, a bit...on the one hand, right?" and proceeds to comment on the importance of the *shahadah*, reciting it in Arabic and translating the meaning for me (lines 12-18). The narrative above is an example of Mariam *apa*'s *dagvat* to me not only because she identifies it as such, but also because of the way she interprets the dream. Instead of simply reciting *the shahadah*, as was done in the dream, Mariam *apa* proceeds to translate it from Arabic into Russian and explains to me the importance of these words in Islam. She does so by quoting religious authority (lines 7-9) and by switching to the second person narrative to address me directly (lines 11-16). Finally, by

using the collective “we” in the final sentence and concluding it with the agreement tag “right?” (lines 17-18), Mariam *apa* positions both herself and her interlocutor as members of the collective *Ummah* and speaks on behalf of it: “we believe sincerely that there is one God, and Muhammad is His messenger.”

### **Dagvat as a Source of Agency for Personal and Social Transformation**

As interview excerpts above illustrate, Mariam *apa* was not only familiar with the practice of *dagvat*; she engaged in delivering *dagvat* when she could, through storytelling. In the course of our conversations, Mariam *apa* described her multiple attempts to deliver *dagvat* to her family members and friends. I argue that, similarly to Uzbek female spiritual leaders (Peshkova, 2006), Muslim Tatar women like Mariam *apa* engage in *dagvat* to advocate for a pious lifestyle that they see as an opportunity for personal and, ultimately, social transformation. Drawing on Mahmood’s (2005) conceptualization of agency as an ability to realize oneself through the enactment of a norm, I further argue that *dagvat* provides an opportunity for Mariam *apa* and women like her to voice their agency. In this case, the norm is grounded in “Islamic scriptures, social practices, and forms of bodily comportment considered germane to the cultivation of the ideal virtuous self” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 2). From this perspective, the communicative act of *dagvat*, then, is not simply an instance of moral discourse, but also moral action geared toward bringing members of the *Ummah*—and thus the *Ummah* itself—closer to a moral ideal.

In the course of our conversations, Mariam *apa* frequently mentioned various Muslim bodily practices she found essential for a Muslim to follow. Those included

mandatory practices, such as the five daily prayers, but also practices that constituted *Sunnah*, normative conduct based on the Prophet Muhammad's example. Among the latter was, for example, a suggestion to always eat with one's right hand because the left hand was to be used for other purposes (such as cleaning one's body). In the excerpt below, I ask Mariam *apa* if she was able to follow certain practices she had just told me about. She first responds by using her Tatar husband as an example and in the process describes her efforts to deliver *dagvat* to him. In the course of the conversation Mariam *apa* eventually opens up about her husband's alcohol addiction—a common problem for many families in Russia—and Muslim piety as a way to solve this not only personal, but also social problem.

*Mariam apa's story – segment #5:*

- L: 1. Are you able to follow all this at home?
- M: 2. Yes, today we already, well. It happens that my husband, for example, grabs  
3. something with his left hand. He knows that I watch him with my peripheral  
4. vision, when we are next to each other, and he says: "I'll eat with my right [hand],  
5. don't you worry." He already-
- L: 6. Does he already recite *namaz* [Tat. 'ritual prayer']?
- M: 7. Well, he. He began reciting it at one time; apparently, I began to press on him too  
8. hard; I began to set a condition that...First, all my topics began to be about Allah,  
9. and he would get irritated by it at first. And I, whenever we would drive  
10. somewhere to trade, I would bring different books, as if they were my lessons,  
11. and I need to translate them from Tatar: he did not understand Tatar. And I would  
12. send him to the mosque on Fridays. And so that he understands, I would take a  
13. book in Tatar, these topics, sermons, and would begin reading as if they were my  
14. lessons. I would say: "If I tell you this, you will understand, and I will understand.  
15. I need to summarize to someone. I will read slowly, and if you don't understand a  
16. word, you ask about the word, just about the translation." And then I would ask  
17. again: "And was there a place where you didn't understand? Did you understand  
18. or not?" And he would think slowly, but I sometimes saw tears in his eyes, and I  
19. thought "it means [yours] isn't the heart of flint, it means you still feel something,  
20. you know." And then I say: "I want a Muslim husband. When I was marrying  
21. you, I married you as a Muslim." He: "There's plenty of time. Plenty of time,  
22. when I am old." As we usually say. But how do you know how long you are  
23. given? And so then he got so tired of those topics, evidently, and if these topics  
24. irritate, it means *shaitan* [Ar./Tat. 'Satan']. [If] at once the person doesn't want to

25. listen, it means *shaitan* got a tight grip on him, and one has to look for some other  
26. methods. And so I asked in different ways: “I would adore you, almost, if you are  
27. a Muslim, a believer.” And he would close his eyes. He did not want to give away  
28. that he was angry. [. . .]

[portion omitted]

29. But very very slowly somehow it got to the point where he says: “That’s the only  
30. thing that’s on your mind. You don’t even notice it yourself.” I say: “I notice  
31. everything. I understand that I became different. But,” I say, “if you want, accept  
32. me the way I am now, but if you can’t, divorce,” I said. I said: “That Mariam  
33. died, she is no longer here. There is only this one now. If you want, accept her, if  
34. you want, you know. But you must know that if you won’t be a Muslim, I won’t  
35. be able to live with you.” And, indeed, as if something turned inside me. And  
36. so... Everything is somehow beautiful in Islam, and you don’t want to accept here  
37. ((*points to her heart*)) neither these shows,<sup>170</sup> nor, you know. One wants to speak on  
38. this topic, to learn, to study. And your friend doesn’t understand. I married him as  
39. a friend, after all. Because he understands, that it’s not just an attraction, but he  
40. understands me. And now these topics don’t interest him. If I constantly develop,  
41. why does he experience such stagnation? Well, [we] could read together at least,  
42. he could simply listen to what I learn. And all this got to me, you know... Well, I  
43. understood that I wouldn’t be able [to live] otherwise. [. . .]

[portion omitted]

44. And so, one time, it so happened that I said... At first, I would [call on] him in a  
45. nice way. And he would get annoyed. I didn’t want in a pushy way at first. But, I  
46. realize that he doesn’t want to listen. I said... You know, before, when he- he  
47. drank before. I would feed him well, so he doesn’t develop an ulcer; I would  
48. make him eat. But then I said that I wouldn’t talk to him anymore, wouldn’t even  
49. cook for him. “I don’t see you at all,” I tell him, “don’t see you, that’s all. Either,  
50. or, make your choice.” Before, even if we fight, I would notice about myself that I  
51. couldn’t stay offended for a long time. As if I don’t talk, my heart would break. I  
52. would speak out everything and would talk right away. But then I was not able to.  
53. I would talk for three days for the first time, would not see him, would not notice.  
54. And it was wild for him. We had lived together for so many years; children were  
55. grown up. And he would not understand. He was in such a state, as if he was  
56. crying. On the one hand, I felt sorry for him; on the other, my heart wouldn’t  
57. accept, that’s it. And then after three days I started talking to him. I say: “What  
58. did you decide?” He says: “There is no escaping. I will study.” I convince him to  
59. study. You know. And he went, started studying. And the teacher who said he  
60. would translate into Russian for him—the lessons were in Tatar—never  
61. translated, as it turned out. I am the kind of person that I “pull leather,” and I will  
62. ask everything I need to know. He is shy. When director walks into the classroom  
63. to teach Islamic worldview, he teaches in Tat- in Russian. But when a teacher, he  
64. for some reason... Well, he thinks he understands, since he is Tatar. So he was  
65. given a nickname. One time he missed a class; his friend came. He laughs and  
66. says: “They were looking for you yesterday. They said: ‘Where is Russian  
67. Anvar’?” Because he doesn’t understand. So, he, as lessons went on, he tried to

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<sup>170</sup> Mariam *apa* is referring to TV shows that she used to watch, but eventually found unappealing.

68. take notes in Russian, drew graphics. But what kind if studying is it? But he did  
 69. start reciting *namaz*, everything, he learned. And so it happened that in the  
 70. summer relatives came for an anniversary, friends gathered, and he had a drink  
 71. with them. And there it went again. He quit his *namaz*. But he doesn't drink  
 72. as much as he used to before, of course, and he goes to the Friday [prayer]. When  
 73. I tell him something, he listens. So then, things have stopped at that for now. And  
 74. he once told me: "When you finish [studying], I will then begin, after all." And I  
 75. called him for *namaz*; he said: "I'll start in the winter." I told him: "Don't you  
 76. forget that you are promising this before Allah. Not for me, so and so, this is  
 77. serious." And I think, this year, *Alla birsa* [Tat. 'God willing'], if I graduate, I  
 78. will say: "Now you, it's time for you to study now."

The excerpt above illustrates Mariam *apa*'s *dagvat* to her husband in an attempt to not simply introduce the Muslim lifestyle to her household, but to deal with a specific personal—and by extension—social problem of his alcohol addiction. To echo Mahmood (2005), the cultivation of the ideal virtuous self in Islam is embedded in the outward manifestation of piety: the performance of certain bodily practices. For example, in lines 2-5 Mariam *apa* describes her husband's attempt to remember to eat with his right hand, a practice followed by pious Tatars.<sup>171</sup> My follow up question about whether Mariam *apa*'s husband recited *namaz* was not accidental: in the course of my fieldwork, I noticed that one's performance of the five daily prayers was often considered an indicator of one's *iman* [Tat/Ar. 'faith']: one's commitment to Muslim piety (or lack thereof). In response, Mariam *apa* does not give a simple answer, but tells a story of her efforts to invite him to Islam—her *dagvat* to him.

Mariam *apa* admits in line 8 that one way her own commitment to Islam manifested itself was in her desire to speak only about *Allah*—another common occurrence among pious Tatars. In lines 9-20 Mariam *apa* further describes a specific strategy she employed for delivering indirect *dagvat* to her husband. While traveling to

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<sup>171</sup> I personally experienced the popularity/importance of this particular practice when an unfamiliar Muslim woman corrected me for eating with my left hand during dinner at the Mukhammadiia *medrese*.

trade shows,<sup>172</sup> she translated sermons from Tatar into Russian out loud as if the material was part of her *medrese* lessons, which she could understand better by reading it out loud. As Mariam *apa* revealed to me in the course of our conversation, she learned to speak Tatar while attending a local *medrese*, while her husband never mastered the language.

Her husband's response in lines 21-22—that he would become an observant Muslim when he is old—reflects what pious Muslim Tatars consider an average (non-practicing) Tatar's attitude toward religion: that it is an occupation for old people, retirees. When Mariam *apa* comments on her husband's answer to her *dagvat* with “As we usually say” (line 22), she indicates that she is well aware of this attitude toward religion. She challenges such an attitude with the rhetorical question addressed both to her husband and to the listener: “But how do you know how long you are given?” (lines 22-23). During my fieldwork, I often heard a pious Tatar pose this question in a conversation to a non-practicing Tatar who would respond to *dagvat* in the same way Mariam *apa*'s husband responded to her call for Islam. Furthermore, Mariam *apa*'s explanation of her husband's unwillingness to listen to her *dagvat* was also quite common among practicing Muslim Tatars: “[If] at once the person doesn't want to listen, it means *shaitan* [Ar/Tat. ‘Satan’] got a tight grip on him, and one has to look for some other methods” (lines 24-26). Mariam *apa*'s questioning of her husband's—and an average Tatar's—assumption that religion is for old age and her reasoning for why *dagvat* is declined indicates Mariam *apa*'s familiarity with the local discourses and practices of *dagvat*.

As Mariam *apa* continues to describe her attempts to bring her husband closer to faith (lines 29-43), she describes a turning point in her own spiritual development and

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<sup>172</sup> Mariam *apa* and her husband traded for a living.



explains why it is important to her that he follow: “And, indeed, as if something turned inside me. And so...Everything is somehow beautiful in Islam, and you don’t want to accept here [points to her heart] neither these shows, nor, you know. One wants to speak on this topic, to learn, to study” (lines 35-38). I argue that Mariam *apa*’s words reflect not simply a shift in her personal belief system, but also her belief in Islam as a possibility for personal and social change. Mariam *apa*’s reference to TV shows is not accidental: previously in our conversation, she talked at length about how they reflected dominant social values, the values she no longer was willing to accept. Mariam *apa*’s agency, thus, is manifested in her *dagvat* narrative through her rejection of the values she no longer considers moral and through her adherence to the new system of belief.

The final segment of the excerpt (lines 44-78) further illustrates Mariam *apa*’s efforts to effect change in her husband’s life by way of *dagvat*. In particular, in lines 46-47 Mariam *apa* talks about her husband’s struggle with alcohol, a common problem of many families in Russia. During my fieldwork, several practicing Muslim Tatar women of Mariam *apa*’s age (fifty and older) told me about their spouses’ alcohol addiction and their own initial attraction to Islam due to its prohibition of alcohol. For example, Madina *apa*, whose story was analyzed in the previous chapter, talked about resenting her husband’s love for celebrations accompanied by large amounts of alcohol consumption. This was also the case with younger practicing women whose fathers suffered from the addiction. Because, as one of the survey respondents at the beginning of the chapter suggested, *dagvat* can be carried out through one’s action, Mariam *apa*’s description of—and changes in—her attitude toward her husband’s addiction also reflects changes in her *dagvat* strategy toward her spouse. At first, Mariam *apa* called on him “in a nice way”

(lines 44-45), took good care of him, so that drinking would not affect his health (lines 47-48), and did not stay offended for long after they fought (lines 50-51). After a while, however, she could no longer continue to treat him the same way and asked him to make a choice (line 50).

In present day Russia, alcohol consumption is cultivated and considered an integral part of the Russian man's character. In their research on socio-historical roots of heavy alcohol consumption among men in Russia, Hinote and Webber (2012) argue that heavy drinking has been a key marker of masculinity for over a century, and today it is further reinforced through hegemonic masculine ideals exemplified by Putin himself (p. 306).<sup>173</sup> At the same time, there is no state/public support for alcohol addicts who are mostly men. As a result, female family members are left to deal with their spouses', fathers', and sons' addictions. In this context, I argue, the change in Mariam *apa*'s attitude toward her husband—and thus a change in her *dagvat*—reflects her desperation over this personal and social problem. The result of Mariam *apa*'s *dagvat* is illustrated by her husband's agreement to study at the local *medrese* (line 58) even if he quickly lost interest due to his lack of knowledge of Tatar, according to Mariam *apa* (lines 67-68). But perhaps a more important indicator of the *dagvat* success was her husband's practice of *namaz*, the Muslim ritual prayer (lines 68-69). As I noted before, one's decision to recite *namaz* is often considered an indicator of one's piety and a turning point in one's spiritual development. Mariam *apa*'s admission (lines 70-71) that her husband resumed drinking, even if less than before, and quit *namaz* after a social gathering with relatives points to both the seriousness of the alcohol problem and a temporary/unpredictable

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<sup>173</sup> Drawing on archival evidence and ethnographic research, Faller (2011) suggests that Tatar men had acquired taste for vodka during World War II when vodka was included in rations that all Soviet soldiers received (p. 42).

nature of the *dagvat* effect.

The final part of Mariam *apa*'s narrative about her *dagvat* toward her husband reflects another important belief shared by practicing Muslim Tatars today: one's spiritual development is ultimately in God's hands—a leitmotif of Madina *apa* and Alfia *apa*'s narratives in chapter 5. This is evident through Mariam *apa*'s words “*Allah birsa*” [Tat. ‘God willing’] in relation to her ability to graduate from the *medrese*—a condition for her husband's continuing of his religious education. It also reflects a complex Muslim notion of *qadar*, divine destiny, or God's knowledge of all events, a kind of predestination that does not exclude the possibility of free will.<sup>174</sup> When applied to *da'wah*, it relieves *da'iya* (the *da'wah* giver) from sole responsibility for his or her *da'wah* efforts.

The Muslim scholar Sakr (1997) writes in relation to the methodology of *da'wah*: “One has to remember that in Da'wah, we do not look for results in as much as we should be concerned for the lawful methods proceeded by good intention” (p. 13). Even though Mariam *apa*'s *dagvat* to her husband did not have an immediate effect, she does not deny its role completely, which is evident in her description of some changes in her husband's behavior: “But he doesn't drink as much as he used to before, of course, and he goes to the Friday [prayer]. When I tell him something, he listens. So then, things have stopped at that for now. And he once told me: “When you finish [studying], I will then begin, after all” (lines 71-75).

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<sup>174</sup> According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam*'s definition of the Muslim notion of destiny, “Muslims believe that human beings are morally and ethically responsible for their actions but are utterly dependent upon God for the ability and power to act” (“Jabr,” 2003).

### **Moral Action and Agency in Piety Stories Through *Dagvat***

I argue that Mariam *apa*'s narrative about her *dagvat* efforts to her husband, combined with other instances of *dagvat* she told me about, and engaged in, during our conversation, illustrates Mariam *apa*'s (and other practicing Muslim Tatar women's) belief in the power of *dagvat* to effect personal and social transformation. While, in accordance with the Muslim theology, Mariam *apa* left the final "say" in her husband's spiritual development (or lack thereof) up to God, her agency was manifested in her continuous attempts to deliver *dagvat* to her spouse and her insistence (in an earlier segment) that "*Allah* necessarily gives to the one who asked" (line 4).

The fact that Mariam *apa*'s piety story was filled with multiple accounts of *dagvat*—and was by itself an instance of it—reflects Mariam *apa*'s identity as a *da'iya* [Ar. 'one engaged in *da'wah*'] and speaks to the presence of the practice among pious Muslim Tatars. As the Muslim newspaper survey I quoted at the beginning of the chapter illustrates, *dagvat* is understood in multiple ways not only by its scholars, but also by Muslims themselves. Using Mariam *apa*'s narrative as a case study, I illustrate that the act of sharing a piety story presents an opportunity for engaging in an oral, indirect form of *dagvat*. As a member of a local and global Muslim community, a practicing Muslim Tatar woman may pursue the opportunity in order to fulfill an obligation to improve the moral condition of the *Ummah*. As such, piety stories represent a form of moral discourse, and their sharing is a moral act. Ultimately, engaging in *dagvat* through the communicative act of storytelling, provides a Muslim Tatar woman with an opportunity to voice her agency, understood as an ability to realize oneself through the enactment of a

norm, by advocating for a pious lifestyle that she sees as a possibility for personal and, ultimately, social transformation.

## CHAPTER 7

### GENDER IN CONTEXT

In the two remaining chapters, I shift the focus of my analysis from examining culturally specific communicative features and functions of piety stories to investigating what these stories—and their narrators—can tell us about the social reality of which they are part. In this chapter, I examine what practicing Muslim Tatar women's narratives can tell us about their own and others' views of gender roles and norms. In my analysis, I respond to Abu-Lughod's (2002) call for abandoning *apriori* criticisms of Islam as an inherently oppressive force towards women<sup>175</sup> and locate the narratives within the local socio-historical milieu. In particular, I argue that Muslim Tatar women's understandings of gender roles and norms must be analyzed against the backdrop of the Tatar historical legacy, influenced by Islam; Soviet gender legacy and post-Soviet transitions; and the current government's neofamilial rhetoric, reflected in present-day popular views on gender.

Focused on a gender-specific class discussion at a local *medrese*, one part of my analysis reveals that young practicing Muslim Tatar women do not always take at face value Muslim normative gender roles. The women's ideas about what it means to be and act as a Muslim woman vary and demonstrate their agency. My analysis of gender is also based on an examination of an older practicing Muslim Tatar woman's piety story. Her narrative further demonstrates that a woman's ideas about gender roles and norms are not shaped by her religious convictions alone. Rather, what contributes to a Muslim woman's understanding of gender roles are micro-level factors, such as the peculiarities of her

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<sup>175</sup> Such criticisms are often produced by those advocates of women's rights whose understanding of freedom as a universal individual right is based on progressive and liberal political agenda (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood, 2005).

individual life experience, and the macro-level context, such as the Russian state's neo-familial stance that encourages women to return to traditional family roles. Finally, I conclude that in a post-Soviet society that has gone through painful changes, women find Islam's protection of their rights and freedoms appealing.

I begin my discussion by arguing the necessity of theoretical frameworks that challenge liberal approaches to gender, which often disregard local contexts, discourses, and desires. I then present a popular Russian attitude toward gender to illustrate that strict division of gender roles and patriarchy are not out of the norm and are often endorsed by many Russian citizens, whether Christian, Muslim, or secular. I explain how the Russian government's pronatalist policies—in light of Russia's demographic crisis—contribute to such perceptions of gender roles. I further provide an overview of the Tatar sociohistorical legacy, informed by Islam, which positions Muslim Tatar women's ideas about gender within the local context. Next, by analyzing excerpts from the “Women in Islam” class discussions at a local *medrese*, I demonstrate that the students, young practicing Muslim Tatar women, do not passively learn gender roles and norms that are associated with the Muslim norm, but also challenge them. Finally, I analyze a piety story of Amina *apa*, a practicing Muslim Tatar woman who compared her roles as a woman during the Soviet era, the post-Soviet transitions, and after becoming a practicing Muslim woman. Her narrative illustrates that Muslim Tatar women find a clear delineation of gender roles and rights in Islam liberating.

### Framing My Query into Gender

I argue for the need for a critical approach in analyzing Muslim Tatar women's gendered desires based on my own struggles to make sense of them. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I often felt irritated by what seemed to me to be the narrow-mindedness and passivity of practicing Muslim Tatar women, particularly the younger generation. For example, when I asked Muslim Tatar women what it meant for each of them to be a woman, they saw themselves, first and foremost, as mothers, educators to their children, and homemakers. Dina, a young practicing Muslim Tatar woman in her late teens, for example, told me that she enrolled in the Russian Islamic University in Kazan after having her son because she realized that it was her duty to provide her children with moral guidance through knowledge. I was not disappointed by the fact that Dina wanted to be a good mother and educator to her son but rather by what I perceived as her lack of any aspirations outside her domestic roles.

When I asked the Mukhammadiia *medrese* female students about the purpose of their education and how they intended to use it, the women almost unanimously responded that they planned to use religious knowledge obtained at the *medrese* first and foremost at home, as future mothers and thus first educators to their children. While many also envisioned teaching at a local *medrese* or giving Arabic lessons in an educational setting, I was disappointed by what I perceived as the narrow window of opportunities that they saw for themselves. For me, in contrast, educational and professional aspirations had brought me far from the domestic space of Tatarstan, to the United States for graduate degrees, which has been challenging, but also empowering in many ways. When I asked if the women also planned to obtain secular education in order



to pursue other career opportunities, I was taken aback when their response was: “Only if my husband approves of it.”

As a female Muslim Tatar myself, I had been convinced that I would understand these women and their desires and aspirations right from the start. The fact that I was repeatedly confused by what appeared to be their passivity led me to examine the perspectives from which I was seeing and evaluating these women. This was the perspective of a graduate of a Russian university with a strong legacy of the Soviet educational system and a U.S.-trained scholar and long-term resident. This chapter is my earnest attempt to overcome limitations of this perspective and analyze practicing Muslim Tatar women’s gendered desires and perceptions of gender within the local contexts that contributed to their development.

In my analysis of Muslim Tatar women’s ideas about gender roles and norms, I follow a critical approach to gender. This approach challenges a monolithic assumption that all women inherently want the same type of equality with men and must fight for their freedom and be helped along the way. Such an assumption is disproportionately applied to contexts where individual freedom (understood in a liberal, progressive sense) has not played a defining role in the socio-historic development. For example, in her famous article “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” Abu-Lughod (2002) questions the discourse of those who demand that Muslim Afghan women be saved from oppressive forces that are traced to Islam. Abu-Lughod illustrates that the liberatory discourse, underlying the political and military action, resonates with colonial and missionary rhetoric that rests on cultural reification and difference.

Mahmood (2005) further explains that the liberatory rhetoric is rooted in the normative ideas of resistance/subversion as the only response to domination (and thus acts of agency) and of freedom as individual (personal) autonomy. The problem with such a stance, as Peshkova (2013) argues, is that it is rooted in the “tradition vs. modernity” dichotomy that leaves no room for exploring “the questions about the nature of discourses articulating non-liberatory desires” (Historically situated desires, para. 1).

### **Gender Discussion Within the Russian Context**

One way to contextualize my analysis of gender roles and norms embraced by Muslim Tatar women is to locate them within a mainstream gender discourse of present-day Russia and to examine its socio-historic origins. To illustrate a popular view on gender, I cite a Youtube video that I came across while browsing a Russian social networking site and that features the popular Russian light fiction writer Daria Dontsova. This “advice column”-type video, which was shared by a former high school classmate of mine, was entitled “Why do husbands leave for mistresses?” and was “liked” by a few thousand female users. Curious to find out what my former high school classmate Marina, an ethnic Russian woman in her early thirties who was happily married and enjoyed a middle-class lifestyle as a stay-home-mom, found interesting about the video, I watched it. A partial transcript of it appears below:<sup>176</sup>

So, you are going to live with a guy, but you are not satisfied by the fact that when he walks in the door, he kicks off his shoes wherever. He hangs his socks on a couch in the living room. [ . . . ] Please forgive all this to him. You need to understand one simple thing: if you are going to get on his back every day with

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<sup>176</sup> The video was originally shot by a Russian website *Sovet.ru*, which describes itself as “A cute internet-site, where movie, TV, show-business, sports, and other stars share with us their experience about how to achieve success in career, love, family life, financial sphere, how to achieve personal harmony” (my translation from <http://www.sovet.tv/contacts>).

“Sasha, put your shoes away!” he will eventually take those shoes and leave you. He will not put his shoes away: take them and put them away yourself. And don’t whine: “Why do I have to do everything myself?” Because you are a *baba* [Ru. woman]!<sup>177</sup> It’s in your blood to clean the house, to make soup, to fry potatoes, right? A woman who, by the age of 30, cannot cook, needs to shoot herself, in my opinion. Because it’s an abnormal situation. (Dontsova, 2012)

While this gendered rhetoric of the popular Russian writer Daria Dontsova may come across as sexist and patriarchal, I argue that it both reflects and plays into popular sentiments—about social order, the role of family, and gender roles—that are being cultivated, circulated, and embraced not only by men, but also by women in the post-Soviet space.

Kuehnast and Nechemias (2004) observe that “neofamilial ideologies that sharply criticize Soviet-style emancipation and advocate a return to ‘traditional families’” are prevalent in the post-Soviet society (p. 2). This is happening in conjunction with the increased separation of the public and private spheres and relegation of women from the public sphere into the private space (a deviation from the Communist ideology that at least in theory encouraged equal participation of men and women in the workforce while preserving the gendered division of labor). At the same time, as the paternalistic role of the Soviet state began to diminish, so did social services provided by the state. Instead, the neoliberal programs encouraged citizens to take personal responsibility for their own basic needs, such as provision of food, health care, and childcare. As a result, women had to find ways to provide for their families by working at the local markets, small shops,

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<sup>177</sup> Dontsova uses the Russia word *baba*, which is emotionally and culturally charged and does not have an English equivalent. It has a variety of connotations, such as “a peasant (uneducated, tough) woman,” an elderly woman, a wimp (when referring to a man), and so on. While it indexes the female sex, it is an absolute antonym to the word “lady” in the type of character it implies (uneducated, butch-like). The word usually carries derogatory undertones, which are also present in this particular instance. Dontsova’s phrase “because you are *baba*” could be best translated as “know your place, woman!”

and the service sector, while simultaneously being ideologically encouraged to assume the traditional female role of the main caregiver to the family.

This women's doubled responsibility of taking care of household work and providing for the family—while their spouses were often unemployed and did not share responsibilities at home—is not strictly Russian, but a post-Soviet phenomenon, as Ghodsee (2004) and Peshkova (2013) illustrate. Further, Rivkin-Fish (2010) argues that the recent attempts by the Russian government<sup>178</sup> to support women are not aimed at ensuring gender equality, which has been shown to benefit women. Rather, they are a continuation of the Soviet government's pronatalist logic (albeit different in form) designed to address a demographic crisis. She concludes that the ultimate goal of the Russian government's family policies is the legitimization of its own power by restoring the public's faith in the country's leadership and the role of the state—the faith that has all but disappeared following the time of painful post-Soviet transitions. Based on this discussion, I argue that culturally (locally) formed notions of family and gender roles and norms in the post-Soviet space must be analyzed against the backdrop of the Soviet gender legacy, post-Soviet transitions, the current government's neofamilial rhetoric, as well as local (Tatar) beliefs on gender roles and norms.

### **Tatar Sociohistorical Gender Legacy**

A brief overview of gender roles and norms traditionally (pre-1917) espoused by the Tatars points to a complex legacy of beliefs when it comes to gender. This legacy informs present-day Tatars' sentiments and attitudes about women. The *Jadids*, the Tatar

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<sup>178</sup> Rivkin-Fish (2010) closely examines the Putin administration's establishment of the "maternity capital" program, initiated in 2007, which would entitle women who have 2 or more children to a credit of 250,000 rubles (roughly \$10,000 at the time).

Muslim intellectuals, who, in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, initiated a debate over the role and identity of Muslims in the Russian Empire played a central part in the Tatar historical debate over gender and the role of women.<sup>179</sup> The debate resulted in a cultural reformist movement whose goal was national renaissance and progress. When it came to the question of women, the *Jadids* were particularly critical of polygyny and the lack of educational opportunities for women and advocated for the expansion of women's rights (Khalid 1998; Rorlich 1986). Many Tatars today take pride in the *Jadids*' progressive ideas and credit them with the educational and social advancement of Tatar women over the past century. However, examining the *Jadid* movement's efforts, Kandiyoti (2007) observes that "[t]he modern identities of the Muslim peoples of the empire were partly forged in an endeavor to respond to Russian representations of their societies and cultures from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century" (p. 603). Furthermore, she points out that the Bolsheviks piggybacked on the *Jadids*' ideas of the emancipation of women, but for very different goals.<sup>180</sup>

A closer investigation into the role and position of Tatar women reveals a more complex picture than the *Jadids*' perception reveals. Kefeli (2001), for example, argues that, despite the eighteen-century claims of both the Russian Orthodox missionaries and the *Jadids* about the oppression of Tatar women, Tatar and Kriashen<sup>181</sup> women played a key role in the spread of Islamic knowledge and thus literacy. She suggests that Tatar women drew on earlier (twelfth century) positive portrayals of women in the Sufi oral tradition. In it, equally with men, women were represented as role models on the path to

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<sup>179</sup> The *Jadid* movement was not exclusive to the Volga Tatars, but also had a significant presence in Central Asia and Azerbaijan, see for example, Khalid (1998).

<sup>180</sup> Kandiyoti's overview of the interpretations of the Bolsheviks' ideas and actions when it came to the notions of gender, family, and women, further points to the complexity of the issue within the Russian/Soviet/post-soviet context.

<sup>181</sup> Kriashen Tatars (or Kriashens) are "the descendants of the Muslim and animistic Tatars who had been baptized from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries" (Kefeli, 2001, p. 250).

piety, emphasizing their role as mothers and thus guardians of faith and social values. Kefeli (2001) concludes that in their attempts to preserve Islam and pass on religious education, women in fact took advantage of the separation of the sexes (by keeping out male Orthodox missionaries) and gainfully utilized kinship, economic, and educational networks, thereby exhibiting agency.

The lasting impact of Tatars' historical gender legacy can still be seen today. For example, Wertheim (2012) analyzes the role of gender in the way young Tatar nationalists use the Tatar language as a political tool. She concludes that, while both Tatar men and women engaged in the active promotion of Tatar as a way to preserve the Tatar nation, men often did so in an explicitly confrontational manner, refusing to accommodate non-Tatar speakers in both public and private domains. Women, on the other hand, engaged in what Wertheim (2012) defines as "'appropriately' feminine promotive Tatar practices," which were non-confrontational, accommodative, and restricted to private and educational set-ups (p. 278). In one particular instance Wertheim describes, a young Tatar male comments on a young Tatar woman's "very business-like" personality and assertive language use as de-feminizing and thus unattractive. While Wertheim notes that a similar language use pattern has been observed among other ethnic minorities concerned with their rights, I claim that in the Tatar context it also reflects traditionally expected gender roles and norms: that women be modest and polite in the public arena, but "experts" in the private and educational spheres (at home, in the community).

It is important to note that there are a fair number of Tatars—both men and women—who consider themselves modern, secular, cosmopolitan citizens. They are not

actively concerned with the fate of the Tatar language, nation, or religion and would question the legitimacy of traditional Tatar gender roles and their manifestations (such as gender-marked discursive expressions, as illustrated by Wertheim (2012)). It is further important to note that it would be a mistake to conclude that the Tatar women's interest in the private domain is exclusively a result of the Tatars' general growing interest in Islam, and therefore, their desire to conform to what could be perceived as traditional Muslim gender roles and norms. My discussion of the gender-related norms historically espoused by Tatars supports that point. Rather, I argue that the Tatar women's interest in traditionally female roles is a combination of (a) the post-Soviet neo-familial ideology that advocates for the return of all (not just Tatar) women to their traditional roles (Kuehnast & Nechemias, 2004), (b) the Tatarstan government's attempts to "re-traditionalize gender roles among ethnic Tatar women"<sup>182</sup> as the biological preservers of the Tatar nation (Graney, 2004, p. 50), and (c) the Tatars' post-Soviet interest in ethnic and religious revitalization. The first two factors refer to both the Russian and Tatarstan governments' attempts—although for different ends—at employing women in aiding with the nation (re)building in the absence of the (Communist) state, a subject well-researched, but outside of this chapter's immediate scope.<sup>183</sup> I further argue that an

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<sup>182</sup> Graney (2004) emphasizes that, unlike in other post-Soviet states, such as Hungary, Poland, or Ukraine, where the governments enacted "draconian and coercive types of neofamilialist legislation" geared towards actively employing the women and their bodies in the nation-building, the Tatarstan government's attitude toward women and family issues remained more paternalistic (and only subtly patriarchal), and thus continuing the legacy of the Soviet state's gender policy (p. 53).

<sup>183</sup> For studies on nationalism and gender in the Post-Soviet space, see Deniz Kandiyoti, "The Politics of Gender and the Soviet Paradox: neither Colonized, nor Modern?", *Central Asian Survey*, 26(4), 2007, pp. 601-632; (2007), Kathleen Kuehnast & Carol Nechemias, eds., *Post-Soviet Women Encountering Transition* (2004); Hilary Pilkington, ed, *Gender, Generation, and Identity in Contemporary Russia* (London, Routledge, 1996); Katherine Verdery, *What was Socialism and What Comes Next?* For key theoretical studies on nationalism and gender, see Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question," in K. Sangari and S. Vaid, eds, *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Lila Abu-Lughod, ed, *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Joane Nagel "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21, 1998, pp. 242-69.

analysis of the practicing Muslim Tatar women's ideas about gender roles and norms must be positioned within the larger post-Soviet society that they inhabit, which the previous section aimed to outline.

### **Medrese Lessons: Creating Muslim Women Out of Tatar Girls?**

My exploration of the question of what it means to be a Muslim woman—as understood by practicing Muslim Tatar women today—led me to sit in on “the Woman in Islam” class at the Mukhammadiia *medrese*.<sup>184</sup> The class was one-semester long and was taught to second year full-time female students (there were about 15 students in the course that I attended, ranging from 16 to 26 years in age). The class met twice a week for a 45-minute long session that was mostly in the form of an informal lecture,<sup>185</sup> with occasional questions from the teacher to the class and students to the teacher. The limited amount of time allocated to the course in the *medrese*'s curriculum was certainly not enough to provide any kind of an in-depth historical perspective and to cover religious/secular debates on the subject. The majority of the students in the class were first-generation observant Muslims who did not grow up with the knowledge or experience of ritual/daily practices expected of practicing Muslims. These women were only at the beginning of their course of study at the *medrese* and their lives as practicing Muslims. Therefore, the purpose of the class was purely instructive: to introduce the young women to the basic set of roles and norms expected of a Muslim woman in accordance with the Qur'an and *Sunnah* [Ar. 'normative conduct based on the Prophet

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<sup>184</sup> A somewhat similar class is taught at the Russian Islamic University.

<sup>185</sup> A traditional format of learning/teaching in higher educational institutions in the Soviet Union, which remains dominant in post-Soviet Russia.



Muhammad's example']. An overview of the course's weekly themes, as presented weekly by the teacher, gives a general idea of what types of subjects were covered:<sup>186</sup>

- Woman's character in the Qur'an
- Moral qualities of a Muslim woman
- Norms of behavior between the sexes
- Clothing requirements (both sexes)
- Engagement (in preparation for marriage)
- Video about Bahrain
- Video about the Sahara desert (an episode from "Man vs. Wild" dubbed in Russian)
- Types of contraception (allowed, prohibited)
- Rights to make oneself look beautiful (allowed, prohibited)
- Qualities of a good wife
- Polygyny
- Rights to an intimate relationship
- Norms of an intimate relationship

The information that the teacher presented was often supported with quotes from the Qur'an or *ahadith* [Ar. 'accounts of exemplary sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad']. When I asked the teacher where the class material came from, she explained that she mostly relied on former teachers and students' notes from the same course. The teacher, a married Muslim Tatar woman in her late twenties (also a Mukhammadiia graduate whose piety story, shared during a class break, was analyzed in chapter 4) also augmented the material with her own observations and personal life experience. There was some formal distance between her and the students. However, the fact that there were no male students present and that the teacher was also a graduate of the *medrese* who was relatively close in age to her students, made the atmosphere in the class less formal than the one I observed in other classes. The atmosphere allowed the young women to speak more freely about gender-specific issues that would be

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<sup>186</sup> I documented the subjects discussed in this course by taking notes during class sessions and by comparing my notes with notes taken by other students.

inappropriate to discuss in front of the opposite sex (especially questions related to spousal intimacy, and birth control, for example).

Based on my analysis of the course content and the format of the class, I conclude that the nature of the course was introductory and lecture-oriented, as opposed to in-depth and critical-thinking-oriented. This is the result of both the time limitations of the curriculum and the legacy of the Soviet higher educational system that placed an emphasis on lectures, when knowledge was passed to the students in a uni-directional fashion. However, it is also due to the embodied nature of Muslim piety, as Mahmood (2005) emphasizes, which was the subject matter of this class. In other words, to be a good Muslim, a good Muslim woman in particular, is to carry out one's mundane daily activities in accordance with the way prescribed by the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, which was what the course briefly covered. While there is no way to measure the effectiveness of the course in producing a certain kind of female subject, the students' responses to the teacher's questions and the information provided in class sheds light on their opinions about what it means to be a Muslim woman in present-day Russia.

In one such instance, reflected in the excerpt below, the teacher began the first class of the semester by asking her students about a Muslim woman's moral qualities. Her question resulted in an exchange where students suggested qualities that the teacher then qualified with her follow up questions. In the excerpt below, the teacher's words are marked by the capital "T," and those of two students whom I could identify from the audiotape are marked by their initials, "D" (for Dina) and "O" (for Olima). I marked the instances when several students spoke simultaneously and I could not identify them by the word "Class" in parenthesis. Because I was sitting in the class, the teacher expected

my full participation in the class and also solicited a response from me. My answers to the teacher's questions are marked by the capital "L" (for Liliya):

*"Woman in Islam" class discussion – segment #1:*

- T: 1. The next subject is moral qualities of a Muslim woman. Let's all think about  
2. which moral qualities a Muslim woman has-  
3. (Class): Modesty, humbleness-  
T: 4. Wait, wait a minute, don't rush. Let's start from the right. Every person names  
5. one quality of a Muslim woman.  
6. (Class): Modesty, fear of God, justice, respect *((long pause))*  
T: 7. More? *((long pause))*  
8. (Class): Faithfulness-  
T: 9. Faithfulness. Faithfulness to whom?  
10. (Class): to the husband, to Allah.  
T: 11. Yes, to the husband, and to Allah, and so on. Next?  
12. (Class): Faithfulness in general. *((long pause))*  
13. (Class): Was modesty mentioned?  
T: 14. Yes, it was. *((long pause))* Should she be kind?  
15. (Class): Yes, of course! Loving.  
T: 16. To everyone?  
17. (Class): Of course not! *((loud laughter))*. To the husband.  
T: 18. To children, right?  
19. (Class): humbleness, obedience, sincerity, patience.  
T: 20. Correct. Dina? *((calling on a student))*  
D: 21. Everything has been named already...  
22. (Class): sociability  
T: 23. Does sociability apply here?  
24. (Class): Yes, no, I don't know, probably not. Yes, if the woman is sociable  
25. while she is doing a call [inviting someone to Islam].  
T: 26. Dina, what quality did you come up with?  
D: 27. Self-command.  
T: 28. Self-command, that's correct. Next?  
L: 29. I also wanted to say self-command.  
T: 30. Come up with something else, then.  
31. (Class): Smart, clean.  
T: 32. Is smart appropriate?  
L: 33. Eagerness for knowledge, can it be considered a quality? Curiosity, but for  
34. good knowledge.  
T: 35. Yes, it is a quality. (To the class): Do you agree?  
36. (Class): Yes, of course!  
T: 37. Yes, of course, you are also students, **Masha'Allah** [Ar. 'God has willed it'],<sup>187</sup>  
38. who are looking for knowledge. Next? *((long pause))*  
O: 39. Cooking well *((loud laughter from class))*.

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<sup>187</sup> In everyday speech the phrase is used to mean "Thank God."

- T: 40. It is a moral quality, but to an extent.  
 41. (Class): It is very important for a man. True!  
 T: 42. So? ((*long pause*)). What about neatness?  
 43. (Class): Of course!  
 T: 44. Next?  
 45. (Class): Hardworking, merciful.  
 T: 46. Correct, hardworking. Next?  
 47. (Class): **Adab** [Ar/Tat. Decency]<sup>188</sup>  
 T: 48. **Adab**, propriety, right?  
 49. (Class): Cleanliness.  
 T: 50: Cleanliness, right, good job! Let's now write-  
 51: (Class): Do we really have to write all this down?  
 T: 52: Not everything, your notebooks are not big enough to fit everything. ((*Dictates*)) "A  
 53: Muslim woman is distinguished by her moral qualities: modesty." We are only  
 54: going write down the main ones. ((*Dictates*)) "Fear of God, chastity-  
 55: (Class): That's right!  
 T: 56: -honesty  
 57: (Class): Uhum, but it applies not only to women, right?  
 T: 58: -humbleness, obedience-  
 59: (Class): Obedience is very important; it's a key to heaven-  
 T: 60: -patience,  
 61: (Class): Softness of character  
 T: 62: Uhum, understanding, and so on.

As indicated in the transcript above, students did not hesitate to name a set of qualities that they believed should define a Muslim woman. Qualities such as modesty, humbleness, fear of God, justice, and respect were named quickly and were met with the teacher's approval. However, long pauses in lines 6, 7, 12, 14, 17 indicate that students quickly ran out of ideas. This could be due to the fact that their imagination was affected by the teacher's presence, who, as a *medrese* graduate, a practicing Muslim for over a decade, and a teacher in the *medrese* educational setting, was a figure of authority. She met each answer with an approval by repeating it out-loud<sup>189</sup> or by qualifying a student's response. For example, in lines 9 and 16, she invited students to clarify to whom a Muslim woman should exhibit faithfulness and love. In line 23, she further invited

<sup>188</sup> The Arabic term, which is also present in Tatar, refers to a certain set of norms of behavior.

<sup>189</sup> I did not reflect it in the transcript for the sake of saving space.

students to question “sociability” as it applied to a moral quality of a Muslim woman. Sitting at a desk next to another girl, I myself felt like a high school student in the classroom, even though I was several years older than the teacher. So, when it was my turn to name a quality, I found myself at a loss, struggling to come up with an answer that would fit the teacher’s expectations, as lines 29-34 indicate. I argue that the students (and I) had trouble coming up with responses because they were trying to meet the teacher’s expectations and define a perfect Muslim woman, an ideal that is not easy to come by or live up to. This is supported by the teacher’s assumption that “A Muslim woman is distinguished by her moral qualities” (lines 52-53), her suggestion (in line 50-54) that students write them down, and their unenthusiastic response to it (line 51).

Mahmood (2005) refers to Muslim piety as “embodied ethics,” suggesting that it is grounded in the regulation of daily (bodily) practices and that one’s adherence thereto cultivates the moral ethos of a Muslim. Because the majority of students in the class were first-generation observant Muslims, they did not grow up with the knowledge or experience of ritual/daily practices expected of practicing Muslims. Therefore, a primary purpose of the course was to introduce the young women to a set of such practices, essential for women. Often times, students actively sought out knowledge/information on how to perform a certain activity in a proper way. For example, when the teacher was lecturing on the norms of Muslim women’s clothing, she suggested that women were not supposed to wear perfume when going outside because the nice smell might attract unnecessary attention from the opposite sex. The students then sought clarification on what to do about lotions or deodorants with strong sweet smells or what to do about a

laundry detergent that had perfume in it and that would make their clothes smell like perfume.

When it came to the issue of the headscarf, the teacher provided specific instructions on the proper way to tie it. All of the female teachers at the *medrese*, as well as all of the full-time female students wore their headscarves tied in the front, carefully covering their heads and necks. My observation indicates that, in general, the older generation of practicing Muslim Tatar women (both the “in-between” generation of women in their thirties and forties, as well as older retirees) were less concerned with the way they tied their scarves and some wore the headscarves only in religious contexts such as mosques and private religious gatherings. Moreover, the oldest generation—retirees who lived most of their lives under the Soviet Union—often questioned the way younger women tied their scarves in the “Arab” way, arguing that Tatar women never wore their scarves that way.<sup>190</sup>

For the “Women in Islam” students, a carefully tied headscarf was not an optional practice. In fact, in the female dormitory, where the students lived and classes took place, I spotted a mirror with a note handwritten in Russian above it, which read: “Look at yourself! Think about your physical appearance. Is Allah pleased with you? Does He accept your cover?”<sup>191</sup> Nevertheless, the teacher felt compelled to comment on the particularities of a properly tied scarf, while cautioning the students against potential mistakes.

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<sup>190</sup> Sabirova (2006) makes a similar observation in regards to generational differences among practicing Muslim Tatar women in Moscow.

<sup>191</sup> The Arabic word used in the Qur’an to refer to covering literally means “curtain” or “cover.” Therefore, the author of the note also used the word “cover” (written in Russian), as opposed to the word “scarf.”

For example, the teacher suggested that collecting hair in a big, high knot with a thick hair band under the scarf was not desirable. The teacher explained that the purpose of the headscarf was to protect one's beauty from onlookers. Therefore, collecting hair in such a way might attract attention by making a (false) impression of a bush of thick, beautiful hair, which would be considered a physically attractive attribute in the local context and thus something to be avoided. In response, the students wanted to know acceptable ways of collecting one's hair under the scarf—a detail that would most likely escape the older women's attention, but was very important for these young students and their performance of piety. In another instance, when the teacher was discussing the norms of behavior between the sexes, students wanted to know if it was okay to shake hands with men in the process of greeting, if wearing gloves would make a difference, and how to pay for something with change without touching the hand of a male cashier.

Yet, it would be incorrect to conclude that gender-specific norms and roles were strictly and unequivocally defined by the *medrese* teachers and that students blindly followed them—an argument often made about gender roles in Islam. While, as an authority figure, the teacher often responded to students' numerous questions regarding normative conduct, there were times when she invited students to use their own judgment. In one such instance, when the teacher opened the subject of norms (of behavior) during a meeting between a man and a woman, a student asked if a Muslim woman had to verbally respond to a verbal greeting by a Muslim man. Muslims traditionally greet one another with the Arabic phrase "*Assalyamu aleikum*"<sup>192</sup> (literal

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<sup>192</sup> The greeting varies in spelling and pronunciation from country to country. In my spelling, I tried to reflect the way most Tatars pronounce it. Having said that, during my fieldwork, I witnessed that younger practicing Tatar Muslims with more extensive knowledge of Arabic would sometimes correct those whose pronunciation of the greeting they found erroneous.

meaning is “May peace be upon you”) and respond with “*Wa aleikum assalyam*” (meaning “and upon you too”). So the student wondered if a woman should display modesty by keeping silent, rather than responding to the greeting. The student’s question resulted in the teacher’s suggestion to use one’s own judgment. I marked the teacher’s words with the capital “T,” and students’ questions and responses with the capital “S” followed by a number because I was not able to identify students’ identities based on their voices on the recording:

*“Woman in Islam” class discussion – segment #2:*

- T: 1. Equal norms [of behavior] apply to men and women during a meeting. It’s an  
2. important subject, right?  
3. (Class): Yes.
- S1: 4. By the way, may I ask you a question? If a man greets you out loud, and you  
5. respond silently, it won’t be considered a sin, will it?
- T: 6. No, it won’t. If a man greets you, and you don’t respond out loud, but only  
7. silently, it is not considered a sin for a woman.
- S1: 8. So, it is permissible?
- T: 9. Yes, it is permissible. But if a woman greets you, you must respond out loud  
10. because a greeting must be met with a greeting.
- S1: 11. I was told that it’s not desirable for a woman to keep silent, that it’s better to  
12. respond out loud.  
13. (Class): Out loud? Nooo...
- T: 14. Hmm, if you want, I can find out the exact **hukm** [Ar. ‘Islamic ruling’]. I will try  
15. to find out if I don’t forget, **insha’Allah** [Ar. ‘God willing’].
- S2: 16. I’ve heard that a woman’s voice is ‘**awrat** [Ar. ‘parts of the body that should be  
17. covered from the eyes of others’].<sup>193</sup>
- S3: 18. The voice is not ‘**awrat**, chill.
- S4: 19. Is it ok for a woman to greet a man first?  
20. (Class): Yes! No! O, my God!
- S4: 21. For example, if a male teacher walks by you...
- T: 22. You see, there are- Well, you have to determine yourself. Islam does not  
23. concretely say that “this is **haram**” [Ar. ‘forbidden’], and “this is **halal**” [Ar.  
24. ‘permissible’], for example, right? You yourselves have to decide. For example,  
25. if out of respect for teachers, you can greet [them] first. Or, your uncle, for  
26. example, or your relatives. If you and relatives visit often, then yes. Or out of  
27. respect. For example, Yusuf **ustaz** [Ar. ‘teacher’] walks by, will you not greet him?

<sup>193</sup> Literally, “nakedness,” “shame.” The term does not refer to parts of the human body that must be covered by everyone at all times. What constitutes ‘*awrat*’ is situational and also depends on the *madhhab* [Ar. Muslim school of law’].



28. Of course, you will greet him out of respect because he is your **ustaz**. Maybe
29. even with title, for example: “Salyam aleikum, Yusuf ustaz.” Because in some
30. Arab countries, one’s social status is binding. It is a sign of respect. It will be
31. even more polite to say “ustaz Yusuf”; it will be even better.
32. (Class): We’ll try to remember.

As the exchange above illustrates, even though the teacher often provided instructive information that outlined a set of specific norms (lines 6-7), she also called on the students to exercise their own judgment while applying these practices to real-life situations and expressing her points of view (lines 22-31).

Furthermore, on another occasion, I witnessed the students question the information provided by the teacher. In one instance, for example, the teacher suggested that women should be careful while admiring one another’s looks, so as not to incite physical attraction to their own sex. During a break that followed, I overheard one student ask another if she agreed with the teacher’s warning that women should be careful while complimenting one another on their looks. “So, I can’t say to another girl: ‘I like your hair today’?” she questioned. The other student responded with “Well, I think it’s a bit over the top,” implying that she found the teacher’s comment to be too restrictive. The other student agreed. In another instance, I observed students wear colorful outfits or adorn their headscarves with colorful ribbons and beads, despite the fact that one of the subjects the teacher covered was norms of female clothing, where she called for moderation and suggested that it was best to stay away from bright “in your face”-type of colors.

My observations indicate that a younger generation of pious Muslim Tatar women is more likely to seek out knowledge on gender-specific Muslim practices than the older generations that already have set, life-experience-based, ideas about what it means to be a

(Muslim) woman. The younger women are also more likely to accept—at least in theory—what could be referred to as “traditional” female roles inside the home (such as housewives, mothers, caregivers) and outside of the home (such as teachers and social workers), as their responses to my questions about their future plans indicated. My participation in and analysis of the “Women In Islam” class at the *medrese* indicates that its primary goal was focused on exactly that: to introduce young female students to a basic set of gender-specific qualities and practices that could serve as a guide to their lives as practicing Muslim women. However, as I spent more time with the students and other young practicing Muslim women who attended the “Woman in Islam” class or a similar class offered at the Russian Islamic University, a mosque, or a Muslim center,<sup>194</sup> I concluded that while younger women were interested in learning about these norms and practices, they did not always follow them unquestionably.

As my discussion above illustrates, sometimes women questioned or chose not to follow suggested rules,<sup>195</sup> thereby engaging into their own interpretation of them and exhibiting a sense of agency. On the basis of that, I argue that while the *medrese* or another Islamic educational entity may contribute to the production of a certain type of a female subject (and female subjectivity, for that matter), it is not a mechanistic, “one-size-fits-all” process. A practicing Muslim woman’s ideas about gender roles and norms are also shaped by micro-level factors, such as the peculiarities of her individual life experience, and by the macro-level context, such as the Russian state’s neo-familial stance that encourages women to return to traditional family roles. As my next data

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<sup>194</sup> A number of classes similar to the “Woman in Islam” were being offered in Kazan at a variety of Muslim facilities during my fieldwork.

<sup>195</sup> I have also heard of instances of the *medrese* graduates abandoning certain Muslim practices that would qualify them as pious Muslims, although I have not had a chance to speak with one.

segments illustrate, the older generation's ideas about womanhood are further shaped by their experience of living in the Soviet paternalistic state with its emphasis on female emancipation<sup>196</sup> and gender equality in the workplace—something that the younger generation of women did not get to experience first-hand.

### **Amina apa's Piety Story: From a Soviet Worker to a Muslim Woman**

Older women's generations' experience of balancing work outside the home—an almost mandatory activity in the Soviet Union<sup>197</sup>—and family came across in their conversations about faith and piety without my solicitation of the subject. In fact, their piety stories often contained narratives about their professional success or failures and how their life outside the home contributed to their perception of themselves and their roles as (Muslim) women. I did not interview a single woman of the middle or older generation who did not have some sort of professional/work experience outside her home. Those women who reached a degree of success in their careers often proudly talked about it, and those who did not, often talked about how balancing family life and work made them stronger women. In other words, the “Soviet” generation of practicing Muslim Tatar women often found pride in “making it” through the years of mandatory work, while managing to build and raise families at the same time.

Unlike the Soviet generation, many women of the younger generation expressed a clear preference for staying at home to raise children, and then, if time and circumstances allowed, trying out the workplace. While embracing a Muslim lifestyle may have

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<sup>196</sup> With regards to the Soviet government's ideas on women's emancipation, Rivkin-Fish (2010) observes: “although the Soviet state touted its commitment to ‘women's emancipation,’ institutionalized equality meant women's full participation in the labor force, not freedom” (p. 706, note 14).

<sup>197</sup> While there was no law that required Soviet citizens to work, a citizen who was not formally employed could be administratively reprimanded for *tuneiadstvo*, literally translated from Russian as “idleness,” and referring to one's failure to work and thus build one's moral character and contribute to the common good of the Soviet people.

contributed to the younger women's perception of certain gender roles, I argue that their preferences for what could be considered a "traditional" role for a woman reflect, first and foremost, a generational difference and are shared by other (non-practicing Muslim Tatars or non-Muslims and non-Tatars) women of similar age. For example, several high school and college classmates of mine in their late twenties and early thirties (including Marina who posted Dontsova's video about women on her page) chose to stay home after having children. These were both ethnic Russian and ethnic Tatar women who were not religiously observant. Despite having obtained higher education, they resolved to devote themselves to their children at least until their children were old enough to go to school. I further argue that this generational difference toward gender roles, manifested in attitudes toward work/family life, is itself a product of the social, historic, and economic realities that define each generation of women. As the narrative below illustrates, during the Soviet Union, staying at home was not an option for the older generation of women. But even after post-Soviet reforms made work a personal choice (as opposed to a state required activity), many women were forced to continue working for economic reasons and often were the sole providers for their families. Amina *apa* is a case in point.

I include Amina *apa*'s story in my discussion of gender roles and norms because in her story about her path to Muslim piety she persistently commented on her multiple roles as a woman. Moreover, as was the case with the "Women in Islam" class, where the most interesting material surfaced during "gray" areas of the class when the teacher was not simply lecturing, but asking questions (or responding to students' questions), it is women who did not easily fit into a certain category that contributed valuable insights towards better understanding of a phenomenon. Making a case for examining culture at

the level of individual lives, Okely argues that “‘cracks of resistance’ to dominant ideologies [. . .] are often more visible when we look at the lives of and listen to the stories of unusual individuals” (as cited in Flueckiger, 2006, p. 24). Amina *apa* “failed” to fit neatly into either side of the generational divide and was in the “gray” area generationally. That is why her story provides a productive vantage point for discussing gender roles and norms. In her mid-forties at the time of our interview, Amina *apa* was part of the “in-between” generation of those who were born and raised as Soviet citizens, but witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union—and everything that it stood for, including both its socio-economic structure and value system—at the beginning of their adult lives (in their early- to mid- twenties). Amina *apa*’s generation lived the majority of their adult lives during the period of Russia’s painful economic and social transitions. This is somewhat similar to another “in-between” generation that came right after it but was young enough to adapt more quickly to post-Soviet realities. I observed the fewest number of practicing Muslim Tatar women (and men) among the representatives of both of these in-between generations. Unlike the younger generation of Muslim women, they considered themselves too mature to embrace a new set of values (Muslim or not) easily and irreversibly. On the other hand, they were too young to fit neatly within the older generation of practicing Muslims, whose interest in Islam, which coincided with and was bolstered by the recent Muslim revival, was perceived as “natural” because it often accompanied retirement and the end of life cycle.

I met Amina *apa* at an informal lesson at the Nurulla mosque. She joined the mosque lessons several years prior to our meeting, studied there for two years, and then continued her religious education at the Mukhammadiia *medrese* as an extra-mural

student.<sup>198</sup> She continued to drop by the mosque every once in a while because of a high respect for *abıstay*, the Tatar female religious teacher at the mosque. Dressed in a long loose dress and wearing a headscarf that was carefully tied in the front, Amina *apa* stood out among her peers and in her group of students. The other women, most of whom were older than her, were dressed in “regular” clothes that met the expected length requirements. But what actually attracted my attention to Amina *apa* was the kinds of questions she asked *abıstay*.

I observed that usually women asked very practical questions, such as how to perform a certain ritual, or how to act in a Muslim way in a certain situation. Amina *apa*, however, often asked questions that had to do with broad social issues. For example, in one instance Amina *apa* recounted a recent conversation she had had with some Tatar women and wanted to know *abıstay*’s opinion of it. According to Amina *apa*, the women were discussing high divorce rates among young Tatars. The discussants blamed young Tatar women for initiating divorce, for being too demanding or lacking *sabır* [Tat/Ar. ‘patience’] because they simply wanted to run away from marital problems, as opposed to solving them. According to Amina *apa*, the women were further concerned that young Tatar girls often preferred foreign men to Tatar men, even if it meant being a second or a third wife. When I followed up with Amina *apa* on this issue during our conversation, she adamantly protested that young Tatar women should take responsibility for failed marriages. Using her own marriage as an example, Amina *apa* questioned what she believed to be older Tatar women’s conviction that women were stronger and that women were the ones who should keep the family together by taking care of it and by being the breadwinners, if need be.

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<sup>198</sup> A form of study where students attend classes at night and on the weekends.

An ethnic Tatar, Amina *apa* was born and raised in Central Asia. According to her, men there were the head of the family and, as such, took care of it even when the Soviet ideology encouraged women's equal participation in the work force, thereby neutralizing men's significance as heads of their families. She objected to her Tatar husband's and mother-in-law's position that forced her to be the breadwinner for herself, her husband, and their two children. She adamantly protested the notion that women and men were created equal and that women can be equal to men: "How can a woman say 'I can compete with a man'? No. He is built differently, he has a different mentality and outlook, he is of a different proportion!" Similarly to the students in the "Women in Islam" class, Amina *apa* found appealing a position that women were a weaker sex and should not be primary breadwinners for the family, as she shared with me:

*Amina apa's story – segment #1:*

1. I argued with one Muslim man. I told him: "We, women, are weak." But he says:
2. "No, you, women, are strong." "We carry the load because we have to, because
3. you dumped it on our shoulders. We would gladly give it back to you. Take your
4. rights." They scream that we took away something from them. We did not take
5. anything away. I, for example, did not take anything away, I was dumped on.
6. Because try to make hungry children fall asleep! There is a hadith that one
7. woman made her hungry children fall sleep. You can't make hungry children
8. sleep! I know it from my own experience! And if you ask your husband, but he
9. left the house and all of his problems behind, he is having fun! And you fill the
10. hungry kids' mouths with whatever you want! Where will you go? You will go to
11. search [for food], to earn. You have to raise children. If he doesn't want to, who
12. will? And they know it, they know it too well that we are the ones who will raise
13. them!

In the excerpt above, by using her own family as an example, Amina *apa* challenged a gender stereotype she found popular among older Tatars: that women are spiritually strong(er) and therefore responsible for their families in multiple ways. She confronted the stereotype by arguing that women had to be strong because they had no

choice. She further disputed what she believed to be men's claim that women took something away from them (line 4-5), most likely referring to work, social status as breadwinners, and, as a result, their masculinity. As Amina *apa* explained in lines 6-13, she had to find ways to support her children because her husband failed to do so.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Amina *apa*'s narrative on Russian (meaning former Soviet, now Russian citizens, not ethnic Russians) men's failure to live up to women's—such as herself—expectations of proper male roles reflects what Rivkin-Fish (2010) identifies as “the crisis of masculinity” critique of Soviet/Russian government's family policies, a critique shared by Russian scholars. Using Russia's recent demographic crisis and Russian government's family policies geared to address it as an example, Rivkin-Fish (2010) explains that unlike western feminist paradigms that focus on “the incomplete implementation of gender equality—or, stated otherwise, on men's failures to do their fair share of housework and caregiving,” Russian critics “trace the demographic crisis to both Soviet policies and current neoliberal conditions that have left men unable to fulfill the role of breadwinner and therefore robbed them of an authoritative role in the family” (p. 719).

Therefore, Amina *apa*'s narrative on men's failure to live up to the expected gender role as a breadwinner—and thus a man—reflects a broader social trend when it comes to issue of gender roles and norms in contemporary Russia, as opposed to a perspective exclusively informed by an Islamic view and practice. Kay (2006) in her study of men in contemporary Russia also comments on the pervasiveness of belief in present-day Russian society that healthy families and marriages are produced by a clear separation of gender roles where the man's chief role is the breadwinner. It is this very



belief that is reflected in the popular fiction writer Daria Dontsova's quote at the beginning of this chapter when she urges women to take good care of their men when they come home from work. Furthermore, this sentiment is not limited to Russia-only and resonates with women in the post-Soviet space. As Peshkova (2013) illustrates in her analysis of an Uzbek woman's understanding of gender roles, women's freedom is understood "not in terms of liberal equality but as gendered complementarity; women did not have to be just like men in order to be equal with them" (Hafiza-opa's terms of change, para. 3).

My conversations with some married young practicing Muslim Tatar women who aspired to build a career or expand their education illustrates the complexity of the issue. On the one hand, the women shared the idea of "gendered complementarity" (Peshkova, 2013, Hafiza-opa's terms of change, para. 3). On the other hand, they observed that their husbands were not objecting to the women's working and/or studying outside the home, *as long as* the women met gender-specific expectations at home (such as taking care of the house and family). While the majority of these young women did not yet have children and/or aging parents to take care of, their willingness to take on a double-burden of family care and work/study further reflects a culturally specific notion of gender norms and roles that excluded the expectation that men do their fair share of housework and caregiving, *as long as they provide for their family*. This is why Amina *apa*'s narrative was so focused on her husband's—and other men's—expectation that she provide for the family, while taking care of the children and housework. I argue that this is also the reason Amina *apa* welcomed a gendered separation of duties believed to be prescribed by Islam, which would relieve her of the responsibility of being the breadwinner.

At some point in our conversation Amina *apa* further told me how, during “the difficult Yeltsin-era years,” as she referred to them, she had to work for ten hours a day without weekends and sick days in order to support her family. Furthermore, she began her story about her road to piety with what she referred to as a “dissonance” between her abilities and the responsibilities that were put on her—both at home and outside the home—which forced her to think about an alternative way of life:

*Amina apa’s story – segment #2:*

1. Well. What can I say? I came here [the mosque] because I had all these questions
2. in my mind, a dissonance of the world, of the situation. And I felt that I was
3. created- that all those directives that are given by the government, the social
4. structure; there was a dissonance. I mean they set forth enormous requirements
5. from a woman, but give nothing in return. The demand from her is huge, but she
6. is not created for such demand. [ . . . ]. The first question I had was: “Why am I
7. responsible for my child if it was taken away from me as soon as it was born?”
8. They took it away from me and sent me off to work. I could not work because my
9. heart was aching for my child. [ . . . ]. I always had this question of why children
10. are taken to school—taken away—and we are sent off to work, but we are told
11. that we are responsible for the upbringing of our children? When I come home
12. [from work], all I have left after the state takes my strength away, is enough
13. energy to prepare a meal, to clean the house quickly, and to put children to bed
14. quickly. Do I see them? Do I spend time with them? Do I devote my energy to
15. them? How could I be responsible for them? In other words, I had a lot of
16. questions.

Amina *apa*’s statements above are more than an expression of her personal point of view based on an individual experience: in some ways it represents a generation of women (many of whom were mothers and close to Amina *apa* in age) who, during the last years of the Soviet Union and later during the economic, political, and social chaos following its collapse, were often forced to provide for their families and young children because men were left without work and were not able to adapt to the new realities as quickly as women. Examining the way women and men in Russia adapted to the new labor market, Ashwin (2006), for example, suggests that men were less flexible than

women about working outside their chosen profession. Unlike women, they were less willing to take jobs that were considered traditionally female or low-status, which often led to men's depression and alcoholism.<sup>199</sup>

While the Soviet Union encouraged equal participation of men and women in the workplace, it also created conditions for it, such as guaranteed employment, state-sponsored healthcare and childcare. Where does, then, Amina *apa*'s criticism of the role and expectations of women during the Soviet and post-Soviet period stem from? Why does Amina *apa* refer to the state-provided child-care as "taking away" her children from her (lines 6-11)? Amina *apa*'s critique of the position of women and expectations from them (lines 1-6) are once again a reflection of the dominant Russian master narrative of the masculinity crisis. According to Russian sociologist Svetlana Aivazova (quoted in Rivkin-Fish 2010, p. 719), the Soviet state's paternalistic role resulted in a close mother-state-child relationship, thereby making the father irrelevant at work and at home. Upon the Soviet Union's collapse, the role of the state was entrusted to the private sphere, which failed to step in, as did the fathers, which led to their continued de-masculinization. While Rivkin-Fish (2010) is critical of the dominant discourse on the masculinity crisis for its reductionist premise that the future of a healthy family—and the nation—depends on the well-being of its men, Amina *apa*'s narrative illustrates that it *is* dominant and thus culturally meaningful.

Furthermore, while Amina *apa* referred to herself as "a person of the Soviet period"<sup>200</sup> and got to experience some social benefits provided by the state (such as free education and free childcare), she is critical of some aspects of it. Amina *apa*'s critique

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<sup>199</sup> I thank Lauren McCarthy for suggesting this source.

<sup>200</sup> "*Ya zhe chelovek Sovetskoi vlasti*" was the exact phrase Amina *apa* used.

(lines 6-16) of the Soviet system that demanded that women participate in the workforce by “taking away” children (lines 7-8) is resonant with what Zhurzhenko identifies as one of the six characteristics of the neotraditional stance on family and gender politics, dominant in present-day Russia: “Soviet family and gender politics, which dissolved the family’s moral autonomy by collectivizing children’s socialization, are adamantly rejected. This collectivized socialization in turn allowed contradictions to emerge between maternal and paternal practices, which neotraditionalists blamed for the rise in juvenile delinquency and other social problems” (as cited in Rivkin-Fish, 2010, p. 711). Therefore, I suggest that Amina *apa*’s—and other practicing Muslim Tatar women’s—desire to trade their roles as workers for mothers and housewives is not necessarily and exclusively a consequence of adopting a Muslim life style, but a reflection of a broader socio-historical trend.

As Amina *apa*’s discourse illustrates, the neotraditionalist/neofamilial paradigm dominant in present-day Russia is critical of the Soviet gender and family policies. Nevertheless, it is the post-Soviet withdrawal of the state that contributed to a deep socio-economic and moral crisis and resulted in a search for an alternative system of values in post-Soviet Russia, contributing to the rise in Muslim piety. Analyzing a similar situation in post-Soviet Bulgaria, Ghodsee (2010) makes a convincing argument that the reason why many Bulgarian Muslims, including women, find conservative trends of Islam appealing is because of their appeal to the issues of social justice and economic equality that people enjoyed during socialism and that were wiped out by post-Soviet reforms. Amina *apa* explained why she found a Muslim lifestyle to be a better alternative for a woman when I asked her how Islam changed her life:

*Amina apa's story – segment #3:*

1. I simply became happy in Islam. Do you know what an oppressed woman I was
2. in **Jahilliyyah** [Ar. 'ignorance'].<sup>201</sup> I was treated like dirt. Islam elevated me.
3. When I read about my rights- I did not know about them throughout my life,
4. especially when it comes to family; all I had was responsibilities. I wasn't even a
5. slave—a slave is at least dressed and fed—I was worse than that. When I started
6. speaking with my husband, he said: "If this is what Islam teaches you, I prefer the
7. Codex<sup>202</sup>." "A set of rules from Allah, it has my rights that you never practiced,
8. never acknowledged." I made a lot of discoveries for myself, but the first one, of
9. course, is that He understood me. I felt myself like a woman, I realized that I am
10. a woman, and that I need to be treated as a woman.

According to Amina *apa*, she found Islam appealing because it provided her with a clear understanding of not only her responsibilities as a woman, but also her rights at home, with her husband and family. She explained: "Even **ahadith** [Ar. 'accounts of exemplary sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad'] say that if a woman is oppressed, she has a right to go to **kaziy** [Tat. 'Muslim judge']. An oppressed woman does not exist in Islam. There is no such thing as oppression in Islam!" Later on in our conversation, Amina *apa* provided another example of how her life would have been different had she known her rights. She admitted that she married into a Tatar family that lacked *akhliak*'' [Tat. 'ethics']—a type of Muslim upbringing and comportment associated with such character qualities as respect for women, the elderly, responsibility for one's family, honesty, and so on. She married her Tatar husband upon her parents' suggestion, who believed the couple would make a good match. Amina *apa* admitted that she did not want to get married, and that had she known about her right, as a Muslim woman, to refuse the marriage even by going against her parents' will, she would have

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<sup>201</sup> While this Arabic word literally means "ignorance," metaphorically and in stories the word is used to refer to the time of "not-knowing," the pre-Islamic period in the history of Arabia, before the revelation of the Qur'an. Therefore, it refers to a certain type of ignorance.

<sup>202</sup> Amina *apa*'s husband refers to a secular civil law.

done so. “I knew nothing about my rights then,” she regretted. Thus, Amina *apa*’s view of Islam as an empowering force and a source of agency challenges the liberatory rhetoric of those who, according to Abu-Lughod (2002), uncritically and univocally advocate for the need to save Muslim women from Islam-dictated oppression.

### **Making Sense Out of Gender(ed) Narratives**

Amina *apa*’s story is extraordinary in that it reveals challenges that many women of her generation faced and struggled with—as daughters, wives, and mothers—but rarely talked about, as something perceived as a “norm.” One of the biggest challenges that Amina *apa* and other women of her generation faced was being away from family and children in an attempt to make a living when her husband could not and the state no longer provided support. Should it be surprising, then, that Amina *apa* talked about Islam as an empowering force that, compared with the load she had been carrying, limited her responsibilities and granted her rights? Liberatory rhetoric often criticizes Islam for what is believed to be its strict gender-based division of roles that necessarily oppresses women. While such rhetoric itself is rooted in the philosophy of liberalism where equality and individual freedom are paramount, it often disregards local contexts where it wishes to enter. As Amina *apa*’s story illustrates, in a post-Soviet society that has gone through painful changes, women find Islam’s protection of their rights and freedoms appealing.

Toward the end of my conversation with Amina *apa*, she tried to reason why many Tatar men—of her husband’s and younger generations—failed to meet what she believed to be their obligations as breadwinners and protectors of families. When I proposed the possibility of larger social and historic events, such as the Second World

War,<sup>203</sup> affecting the family structure and gender roles, Amina *apa* agreed, regretting that polygyny was not allowed then. “Women had to carry the load, and it became a custom,” she bemoaned. “If polygyny had been possible then, there wouldn't have been orphans. Every orphan would have a family—this is what Islam is all about. Taking care of everyone!” Amina *apa* concluded. Furthermore, when it comes to the younger generation of practicing Muslim Tatar women, their desire to focus on the family and be wives and mothers first, goes hand-in-hand with the present-day neotraditional/neofamilial rhetoric of the Russian state. However, unlike the state, which encourages women to resume “traditional” roles *without* providing them with structural opportunities to do so (as correctly noted by Kuehnast & Nechemias 2004), Islamic lifestyle requires—even if only rhetorically and morally—that men and women take seriously obligations required of them by the Qur'an.

While the popular Russian writer and advice columnist Daria Dontsova's opinion on gender roles in present-day Russia—that women must do housework and caregiving because they are women—may come across as too sexist to advocates of western feminist theories, it reflects culturally shared norms that have been engendered by Soviet family policies and the post-Soviet government's neofamilial and neotraditionalist stance. Therefore, practicing Muslim Tatar women's ideas about what it means to be a (Muslim) woman must be understood vis-à-vis the larger socio-historical context of which they are part. My analysis of the “Woman in Islam” class session and Amina *apa*'s story reveals that embracing a Muslim lifestyle contributes to women's reflexivity about what it means to be a Muslim woman. However, Muslim Tatar women's perceptions of gender roles and norms are shaped not only by an interpretation of Muslim theology. They are also

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<sup>203</sup> Known in the former Soviet Union as “the Great Patriotic War,” as I referred to it.

reflective of the individual circumstances of the women's spiritual journeys and life experiences that are part of the social order that the women inhabit.



## CHAPTER 8

### PIETY STORIES AS SITES OF STRUGGLE OVER THE ROLE OF ISLAM IN TATARS' IDENTITY AND FUTURE

In this chapter, I use three Muslim Tatar women's piety stories to explore Tatars' search for—and negotiation of—an identity in light of the post-Soviet ethnic and Muslim revival. Working from the position that discourse both reflects and constitutes social reality, I argue that the women's piety stories can serve as one site, a discursive one, where Tatars' identity struggle takes place and where the women exercise their agency. Based on the women's narratives and my ethnographic observations, I identified two socio-cultural trends at the heart of Tatars' search for identity, summarized in the following questions: (a) to what extent should Islam define Tatar identity? and (b) what type of Islam should Tatars follow?

The first trend suggests that Tatars no longer conflate their ethnic and religious identities, as was recently the case during the sovereignty movement of the 1990s and early 2000s. Today, the Tatars' interest in revitalizing their language and building a sovereign nation is also accompanied by a growing interest in Islam, which is no longer treated merely as a marker of ethnic identity, but as a powerful force in its own right.<sup>204</sup> An increasing number of Tatars perceive Islam—and not the Tatar language or an independent Tatar state—as a moral imperative for personal change and, therefore, social transformation.<sup>205</sup> This trend has a generational dimension to it. Unlike the younger generation of Tatars, the older generation still considers the ethnic element of Tatar identity, exemplified in the Tatar language, an important feature of Tatars' identity and

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<sup>204</sup> Ibrahimasic (2012) makes a similar observation about Bosnian Muslim women.

<sup>205</sup> Peshkova (2009) traces a similar trend among Uzbek women in post-Soviet Uzbekistan.

their future survival as an ethnicity. This is particularly evident in the way the sovereignty movement's activists talk about Islam as a defining feature of Tatars identity, as one of the women's stories analyzed here illustrates.

The second trend, prompted by Tatar's recent interest in Islam, is an ongoing debate over what kind of Islam should be part of Tatars' identity. This debate occurs among non-Muslims, non-observant Muslim Tatars, as well as practicing Muslim Tatars who do not possess sufficient theological knowledge for interpreting differences within normative Islam. It often treats sources of Islamic knowledge as a direct reliable indicator of one's Muslim identity, with variation by gender and generation.

In addition, the Tatars' debate over the kind of Islam they should practice—and thus what should or should not be part of their identity and religious norm—is often focused on the personal level of physical (bodily) practices and religious rituals, as opposed to more abstract normative underpinnings of a certain Islamic tradition. This is, in great part, due to the fact that Muslim piety is grounded in quotidian physical practices, such as the five daily prayers. As a result, practical Islamic knowledge (and its application) is inseparable from less practical (theological) knowledge, and the practice is taken to serve as a direct indicator of a certain kind of Islam. To put it simply, the way one recites the five daily prayers is popularly believed to be indicative of what kind of *madhhab* [Ar. 'Muslim school of law'], if any, one embraces.<sup>206</sup> My ethnographic observations and interviews indicate that, contrary to popular belief, both sources of Islamic knowledge and physical expressions of piety are unreliable markers of an average Muslim Tatar's identity. This is due to the fact that there are too many ways of

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<sup>206</sup> Sabirova (2011) stresses the importance of Islamic knowledge for young Muslim Tatar women attending *medrese* lessons in Moscow (p. 333).

interpreting original sources of Islamic knowledge (such as the Qur'an and *Sunnah*) and the majority of people (among them, Muslims and non-Muslims alike) do not have sufficient theological knowledge and training to correctly identify a physical practice as part of a certain branch of Islam.

These stereotypes persist, however, and I argue that practicing Muslims are not only aware of stereotypical perceptions formed on the basis of one's sources of religious knowledge or physical practices, but actively seek communicative strategies to deal with such perceptions. One such strategy is (re)negotiating and legitimizing their religious identities at the discursive level, in a personal narrative such as piety story, an act that constitutes agency. Finally, I conclude that however inaccurate and stereotypical such perceptions might be—when, for example, a long beard or a loose long dress is associated with conservative (often called Wahhabi or Salafi) Islam—they are part of the Tatars' struggle in search of identity in light of post-Soviet religious revival in Russia.

In this chapter, I first discuss how Tatars' interest in ethno-national aspects of their identity, of which religion was considered an inseparable part, is moving toward acknowledging Islam as a force in its own right, with some variation by generation. By analyzing an older practicing Muslim Tatar woman's piety story, I illustrate that the older generation still consider ethnic elements of Tatar identity, language in particular, important for securing the Tatars survival. The younger generation, on the other hand, places a bigger emphasis on Islam. The next section outlines the recent socio-historic context, such as post-Soviet religious freedom and the Russian government's recent attempts to cultivate an "official Islam." It is within this context that Tatars debate the kind of Islam they should practice. I further discuss why few women rarely openly

identified a specific religious tradition that they observed despite the fact that the matter of *madhhabs*, Muslim schools of law, is at the center of Tatars' Islamic revival. I proceed to analyze two practicing Muslim Tatar women's piety stories to demonstrate that one's sources of religious knowledge, as well as physical manifestations of piety, are often treated as direct markers of one's religious identity. Based on the women's stories and my ethnographic observations, I argue that practicing Muslim Tatar women are aware of others' (often false) perceptions of them on the basis of their religious education or physical practices. I demonstrate that one way the women address such perceptions, and thereby negotiate and legitimize their own ideas about Islam and their religious identities, is at the discursive level in a piety story. I conclude that piety stories represent discursive sites where Tatars struggle over identity and women's agency take place.

### **From Tatar Ethno-nationalism to Islam?**

Previous research on Tatar identity politics (Faller 2000, 2002, 2007; Wertheim 2003b, 2005) suggests that, in the context of Tatars' post-Soviet ethnic revival and quest for independence, Tatars' sense of identity was shaped by an orientation away or toward the Russian language and culture, which, for instance, manifested itself in Tatars' explicit calls and attempts to avoid speaking Russian when possible. Wertheim (2005), for example, points to "a conflation by some of Tatar and Muslim identity" (p. 118), in which the Tatar language could serve as an equal marker of both ethnic-national (Tatar) *and* religious (Muslim) identity. Such close association between ethno-national and religious aspects of the Tatar identity traces its roots to the Russian conquest of 1552, imperial policies toward the Volga Tatar population, and the Soviet nationality policies.

As Mukhametshin (2009) explains, the destruction of Tatar traditional social structures after the Russian conquest led to Tatars' turning to Islam as a unifying source for their *national* identity (p. 35)<sup>207</sup>. The Soviet state's policy of atheism further pushed Islam into the realm of cultural traditions and rituals, leading to its vernacularization. Finally, the Soviet nationality policies, which artificially placed people into nations and used language as the main marker of a nation, resulted in people's perception of language as the constitutive of their identity (Hirsch, 2005; Faller 2011).

Today, however, the Islamic revival overlaps less categorically with Tatars' ethno-nationalist sentiments. My research points to a shift from once dominant ethno-nationalist foundations of Tatar identity (sustained by post-Soviet Tatar ethno-nationalist movements of the late 1980s-early 1990s) to a more pronounced religious component. For many practicing Muslim Tatar women, being a Muslim and being a Tatar are no longer synonymous. According to my interviewees, what marks one as Muslim is no longer (Tatar) ethnicity, (Tatar) language, or aspirations to a (Tatar) nation-state, but one's recognition and knowledge of Islam and adherence to practices associated with the Muslim way of life, in other words, observable commitment to Muslim piety. Even though Tatarstan's prominent scholar and historian Iskhakov (2010) points to a rise of "religious consciousness" among all peoples of post-Soviet Russia, I attribute Tatars' increasing interest in Islam in great part to the Tatar ethno-nationalist movement's stifled efforts to realize its aspirations for political sovereignty and long-term Tatar language revitalization programs (Karimova, 2010).<sup>208</sup> This is not to say that ethno-national aspects of Tatar identity, especially the Tatar language, have completely lost their relevance for

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<sup>207</sup> Rorlich (1986) credits the Tatar reformist movement of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries with creating "a religious-secular symbiosis" that helped mobilized the Tatar national consciousness (p. 65).

<sup>208</sup> Faller (2011) makes a similar observation (p. 297).

Tatars today. Rather, Islam is taking a more prominent place in the way Tatars see their collective and individual identities: it is no longer easily equated with ethnicity.

The growing interest in Islam is particularly evident in the way the former sovereignty movement activists talk about Islam, as Taskira *apa*'s narrative below demonstrates. I met Taskira *apa* and spoke with her on multiple occasions at the Mukhammadiia *medrese* where she taught at the time. Taskira *apa* was in her late sixties and a practicing Muslim. Born and raised in a Tatar village, Taskira *apa* shared her own and her generation's struggles over preserving the Tatar language and identity in the context of the Soviet nationality policies. Despite a Soviet-era requirement that higher education be conducted in Russian-only,<sup>209</sup> which put native speakers of ethnic languages at a disadvantage, Taskira *apa* was a university graduate and worked as a school teacher all her life, teaching various subjects, from math and physics to the Tatar language and literature.

A die-hard activist of the sovereignty movement, Taskira *apa* gradually became a practicing Muslim in the 1990s as Kazan's mosques re-opened their doors following the Soviet-era religious hiatus. As someone who became a practicing Muslim later in life, but before retirement, Taskira *apa* was critical of the average Tatar's belief that one can wait until retirement to become interested in religion. This criticism set her apart from the majority of Tatars of her generation and betrayed her interest in Islam. During my second conversation with Taskira *apa* upon her return from *hajj*, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, she spoke of Islam as an important unifying force for Tatars. She noted that it was

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<sup>209</sup> To-date, all higher educational institutions in Tatarstan conduct instruction in Russian only. In her conversation with me, Taskira *apa* regretfully admitted that despite the efforts of the sovereignty movement that she was part of, Tatars were not able to secure "continuous education" in Tatar, which would allow Tatar-speaking high-school students to continue their higher education in Tatar.

sad for her to observe that the majority of pilgrims from Tatarstan were people of an older generation, retirees. In her reflections on the fate of the Tatar nation, she emphasized the supremacy of faith in preserving the Tatar ethnicity. Such a stance signifies a move from the sovereignty movement's ideology that envisioned the Tatar national (political) independence and the revival of the Tatar language as key conditions for Tatars' survival and their future.

*Taskira apa's story - segment # 1*

[portion omitted]

- T: 1. Indeed, Islam is a pillar around which we should hold on to.<sup>210</sup> Because the loss  
 2. of our nation<sup>211</sup>—when there was a sharp drop in the Tatar population in  
 3. Tatarstan and the [Soviet] Union—coincides with our turning away from our  
 4. religion in the 60s and 70s. Meaning, without acknowledging Allah or the  
 5. Qur'an, people developed some sort of irresponsibility, some sort of “anything  
 6. goes” attitude, *talimsizlik* [Tat. ‘recklessness’], a mess. The people did not  
 7. understand. And so the fall of the national consciousness, national pride,  
 8. happens to take place at a moment when my nation turned away from religion.  
 9. First, [it was] ignorance: we were torn away from our history by the decree of  
 10. 1944. Stalin's decree prohibited minorities from studying their history.  
 11. Naturally, we no longer had the national consciousness, which contributed to  
 12. the fall of the national pride. Without knowing who you are, without knowing  
 13. what to be proud of when it comes to your nation, the national pride cannot be  
 14. cultivated. And so our generation, the children of the postwar period,<sup>212</sup> it is like  
 15. that. And one more thing caught my attention: the pilgrims from Russia were  
 16. much older than the pilgrims from other countries. This is because our people,  
 17. people today—when you approach them with *däg'vat* [Tat. ‘call to Islam’],  
 18. when you make a call, when you begin to talk [about Islam]—[they say] ‘We  
 19. are not retired yet.’ ‘When we retire, we shall see, maybe we will come to  
 20. Islam.’ Even though they admit that Allah exists, that Allah is one, that they are  
 21. Muslim. Every Tatar calls himself<sup>213</sup> a Muslim. If not everyone, maybe 99 or 95  
 22. percent will say that he is a Muslim. But he does not live in accordance with  
 23. Islam, in accordance with Shariah. He considers himself a Muslim just because  
 24. he is a Tatar. How is that? We know that it is impossible, right?

<sup>210</sup> Speaking in Russian, which was a second language for her, Taskira *apa*, sometimes conjugated her prepositions in non-standard ways, as in this case. Discussing Soviet ethnic language policies and their effects on ethnic minorities, Taskira *apa* reflected on her own language skills, acknowledging difficulty with communicating in Russian sometimes.

<sup>211</sup> Taskira *apa* use the Russian word “*natsia*.”

<sup>212</sup> Taskira *apa* refers here to the post WWII period.

<sup>213</sup> Taskira *apa* uses masculine in accordance with the formal style of speech in Russian; it does not imply her preference of one gender over the other.

Speaking in a collective voice by using “we”—and thus on behalf of Tatars—Taskira *apa* refers to Islam as a “pillar,” a foundation for building and securing the future of Tatars (line 1). She directly links the loss of the Tatar people to their “turning away from” their religion, from “Allah” and “the Qur’an” (lines 2-6). Furthermore, in lines 7-8 Taskira *apa* attributes the loss of Tatars’ national consciousness and pride—factors that she also considers crucial for a people’s survival—to a moment in history when Tatars “turned away from religion.” The degree of importance that Taskira *apa* assigns to Islam in securing the Tatars’ future is further illustrated by her criticism of the majority of Tatars’ disinterest in practicing their religion (lines 16-20).

Taskira *apa*’s criticism of the fact that the majority of Tatars call themselves Muslim and believe in Allah, but do not live in accordance with Islam, illustrates that she is aware of the common perception of Islam among Tatars, a perception that equates ethnic and religious aspects of identity. It also speaks to the fact that for Taskira *apa* herself being Tatar and being Muslim is no longer synonymous, which is evident in her voicing of the popular assumption and then questioning it (lines 23-24). Finally, I argue that by using the collective “we” in challenging the common belief that being a Tatar means being a Muslim (lines 23-24), Taskira *apa* resumes a collective, not just her personal stance and invites me, a Tatar, to attest to such belief. The fact that she questions the popular assumption on behalf of other Tatars reflects a shift in the way Tatars perceive Islam today—with growing importance—even if the majority remains non-observant.



## **Generational Differences in Tatars' Orientation to Ethnicity Versus Islam as Basis of Identity**

Even though Taskira *apa* referred to Islam as central for uniting Tatars (line 1) and challenged the majority of Tatars' conflation of ethnic and religious identities (lines 16-24), she did not completely dismiss the importance of ethno-national aspects of Tatar identity. This is particularly evident in lines 9-15, above, where Taskira *apa* attributed Tatars' lack of national pride, consciousness, and identity to Stalin's prohibition of ethnic history. For Taskira *apa*, then, Islam was not the only important aspect of Tatar identity, even if a central one. As someone who closely worked with the *medrese* students of all ages and walks of life, Taskira *apa* was able to describe the generational difference she observed when it came to the issue of Tatar identity.

The difference was in the fact that the younger generation of Tatars no longer considered the knowledge of the Tatar language and history as important markers of Tatar identity. Furthermore, even though Taskira *apa* acknowledged historical reasons that contributed to the older generation of Tatars' loss of national consciousness, she held the older generation responsible for the younger generation's loss of interest in their language and history. Using her own evening and extramural students, most of whom were Tatars in their fifties and older, as an example, Taskira *apa* expressed her frustration over the older generation's ignorance and failure to raise ethnically-conscious children interested in their own language and culture:

*Taskira apa's story - segment # 2*

[portion omitted]

T: 25. The young generation, some are russified already, even if in Islam, in religion. The  
26. young generation is not in a hurry to learn its native language and to finally realize  
27. that one is a Tatar—to realize and to reflect about one's national pride, about one's  
28. history—not in a hurry. The older generation is in a hurry, but they are late: their

29. time has passed. They say: “ There are mixed marriages in our family. Our children  
30. and grandchildren do not speak the language. What can we do? What can we do?  
31. We are too late.” The older are too late. [long pause]. These [the younger] don’t  
32. want to, but the older are too late. This is the problem.

By stating in line 25 that the younger generation of Tatars is “russified already, even if in Islam,” Taskira *apa* refers to a new way of being a Tatar, a new conceptualization of Tatar identity. When applied to Tatars, the Russian version of the word “russified” [*obrusevshie*] refers to cultural assimilation, language use in particular, with the Russian language and culture. Until recently, it also simultaneously implied religious assimilation evident in one’s way of life. In chapter 5, for example, Madina *apa* attributed Tatars’ alcohol and pork consumption (both are prohibited in Islam) to russification. In other words, “to be russified” was to be like a Russian in all aspects of one’s identity: language use, cultural traditions, religion. That is why, Taskira *apa* points out the new way of being a Tatar, embraced by some young people, when one is russified in all other aspects except for religion. I argue that the fact that Taskira *apa* uses the phrase “even if” in her statement “russified already, even if in Islam, in religion” (line 25) signals her perception of such an identity as contradictory and possibly disappointing. This disappointment, I suggest, does not come from the younger generation’s interest in Islam, but from their willingness to remain “russified” in other aspects of their identities. This is evident from lines 26 and 27, where Taskira *apa* links being a Tatar with knowing the Tatar language.

In the excerpt above, Taskira *apa* summarized the difference between the older and younger generations’ attitudes toward the “native language” (line 26), “national pride” (line 27), and “history” (line 28): the older generation’s interest in the above came too late to ignite it in their children and grandchildren. Malika, a younger practicing Muslim

Tatar woman whose story is presented in the second part of this chapter, made a similar observation on a separate occasion. According to Malika, Tatars needed to focus on reviving Islam because they had lost their chance at securing political independence and cultural sustainability (such as the Tatar language).

For Taskira *apa*, however, preserving the Tatar language remained as crucial as reviving Islam. In the excerpt below, she spoke about Tatar religious institutions as the last bastions for saving the Tatar language. Taskira *apa* supported her reasoning by the fact that, since its original arrival in Volga Bulgaria in 922,<sup>214</sup> Islam has been observed by Tatars in Tatar and Arabic only. Furthermore, Taskira *apa* referred to protecting the Tatar language as a *farz* [Tat. ‘mandatory religious act’], an act of piety binding on every Muslim (such as the five daily prayers) and thus binding on Tatars:

*Taskira apa’s story - segment # 3:*

[portion omitted]

- T: 33. A mosque and *mādrāsā*<sup>215</sup> are the only places today where our language can be  
 34. preserved and by preserving our language, our nation can be saved. But no one is  
 35. working on it. [ . . . ] I subscribe to the following principle: only two languages  
 36. should function at *Mökhämmädia*<sup>216</sup> and all other *mādrāsä*: Tatar and Arabic.  
 37. Tatar—because since 922, since the moment of accepting Islam, Islam has been  
 38. here in the Tatar language first, and our forefathers, all of them observed in  
 39. Tatar, the **Hanafi māzhāb**<sup>217</sup> [Tat. ‘Muslim school of law’]. And the second  
 40. language, Arabic—because it is the language of the Qur’an. [ . . . ]. But here at  
 41. *Mökhämmädia* all subjects are taught in Russian!
- L: 42. But they say that what’s more important is-
- T: 43. -not the language, but Islam!
- L: 44. Not the language, but Islam.
- T: 45. Not the language. They also say: ‘we live in Russia, so for Russia Russian is its  
 46. official language.’ [ . . . ] And this: ‘Islam is for all nationalities, so if you are in  
 47. Islam, it’s not necessary to know the language,’ they say. But *Allah tügalä* [Tat.

<sup>214</sup> Historians had considered the year of 922 as the year of official conversion to Islam by Volga Bulgarians. However, some evidence suggests that Islam had penetrated the region earlier through trade with Central Asia (Mukhametshin 2009).

<sup>215</sup> Throughout her narrative, Taskira *apa* used the Tatar version of the word *medrese*.

<sup>216</sup> Throughout her narrative, Taskira *apa* used the Tatar pronunciation of the *medrese*’s name, reflected in the way it’s spelled in the transcript.

<sup>217</sup> Taskira *apa* uses the Tatar version of the Arabic term *madhhab*.

48. ‘God, the Exalted’] created us by tribes, and gave every tribe its own language.  
 49. And *Allah tǵalä’s* gift is *farzgyna* [Tat. ‘nothing, but the mandatory’], we have  
 50. to accept it. Meaning, without knowing our own language, we go against *Allah*  
 51. *tǵalä*, we do not fulfill the *farz* [Tat. ‘the mandatory’]. [ . . . ] Our youth lacks  
 52. historic and national consciousness; this is the reason.

The equal importance of ethnic and religious aspects of Tatar identity, typical for the older generation, comes through at the beginning of Taskira *apa’s* narrative above (lines 33-34). In it, she identifies religious institutions as the only places where the Tatar language and thus the nation can be preserved. When in line 42, I tried to voice the younger generation’s reason for the use of Russian, Taskira *apa* repeated it without my having a chance to finish the sentiment. This demonstrates her familiarity with the younger generation’s disinterest in the ethnic element of Tatar identity such as the Tatar language. In lines 45-46, she continued quoting what she believed to be a common indifferent attitude toward the Tatar language (line 45) and the younger generation’s separation of religious and ethnic identities (lines 44-45). Finally, by treating one’s knowledge of a native language as a *farz*, a religious duty (lines 47-51), Taskira *apa* provided a powerful counter-argument to the attitudes she did not share. The fact that Taskira *apa* provided theological evidence in support of her argument for preserving the Tatar language speaks to her familiarity with the younger generation’s “favoring” of Islam over ethnic traditions and her attempt to build a line of argument that the younger generation will consider valid.

Taskira *apa’s* conviction that one’s ability to speak and thus preserve one’s native language was an act of piety binding on Muslim Tatars was shared by other Muslim Tatar women of her age. For example, Malika, the younger Tatar woman mentioned above, told me that her mother-in-law, a Muslim Tatar woman in her late sixties, scolded

Malika's children for speaking Russian because the older woman considered it a sinful act. However, an ethnic Tatar and a fluent Tatar speaker herself, Malika did not approve of her mother-in-law's conflation of the ethnic and religious elements of Tatar identity. Malika had appreciation for the Tatar language and made every effort to speak to her children in Tatar. However, she was critical of what she perceived as her mother-in-law's inability to separate Islam from an ethnic tradition. Such generational difference in the role of religious and ethnic elements in defining the Tatar identity, represented by Taskira *apa*'s narrative, is a phenomenon that is becoming more pronounced in present day Tatarstan.

However, the older and younger generations' ideas about what makes one a proper Tatar or Muslim are not absolute. A practicing Muslim in her late sixties, Taskira *apa* was a staunch advocate for preserving the Tatar language as a necessary requirement for saving the Tatar nation. At the same time, she was highly critical of her own—the older—generation's view that one does not have to become an observing Muslim until later in life, until after retirement. A former sovereignty movement activist, Taskira *apa* remained committed to preserving the Tatar language, history, and cultural heritage. Nonetheless, throughout her narrative she identified Islam as the main “pillar” that should unite Tatars. Taskira *apa*'s position on the importance of Islam in securing Tatars' future and identity symbolizes their growing interest in Islam, which many perceive as a moral imperative for personal and social transformation.

### What Kind of Muslim?

The question of the degree to which Islam should be part of Tatars' identity and their future is not the only issue at the center of Tatars' public and personal debates. Another important dilemma that Tatars are currently grappling with is what kind of Islam should be part of their identity, and this is reflected in Muslim Tatar women's piety stories. This question subtly came through in Taskira *apa*'s narrative above (lines 37-40). When talking about the theological importance of Tatar, Taskira *apa* stated: "Tatar—because since 922, since the moment of accepting Islam, Islam has been here in the Tatar language first, and our forefathers, all of them observed in Tatar, the **Hanafi *māzhāb***"<sup>218</sup> [Tat. 'Muslim school of law']." In the second part of the sentence, Taskira *apa* identifies not only the language in which Tatars historically worshiped—Tatar—but what kind of *māzhāb*, a Muslim school of law they observed: the Hanafi. Therefore, while providing the reason for using Tatar and Arabic as the only legitimate sacred languages, Taskira *apa*, in passing, also identifies what kind of Muslims Tatars should be: the ones practicing the Hanafi *madhhab*.

As the opening chapter of this dissertation discussed, the Volga Tatars have historically practiced the Hanafi legal school of Sunni Islam, which is the oldest and typically perceived as the most liberal of the four Sunni theological schools of law.<sup>219</sup> Some scholars,<sup>220</sup> clergy,<sup>221</sup> and public figures<sup>222</sup> are concerned over the fact that the

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<sup>218</sup> Taskira *apa* uses the Tatar version of the Arabic term *madhhab*.

<sup>219</sup> The other three are *Maliki*, *Hanbali*, and *Shafi'i*.

<sup>220</sup> See, for example, Emelianova (2003), Iskhakov (2010).

<sup>221</sup> Former Tatarstan's chief *Mufti* [Ru. 'religious leader'] Ildus Faizov, elected in April 2010, at the outset publicly declared his support for the Hanafi *madhhab* as the only religious school of legal thought endorsed by the Muslim Spiritual Board of Tatarstan, which he presided over.

<sup>222</sup> Rais Suleimanov, head of the Volga branch of the Russian Institute of Strategic Research, makes such claims on a regular basis in local and national media (particularly the news website Regnum) and public forums. See, for example, his interview in the Kazan edition of the federal newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty* [Ru. 'Arguments and Facts'] (Shtele, 2013). Suleimanov's claims about the threat of radical Islam in the Volga region and about Tatarstan's ethnic policies

opening of borders after the fall of the Soviet Union, the newly-acquired religious freedom, and lack of control over religious activities and institutions resulted in radical, especially Wahhabi/Salafi, forms of Islam spreading among post-Soviet Muslims.<sup>223</sup> At the root of this fear is the “good Muslim/bad Muslim” paradigm, manifested in today’s “Culture Talk,” a popular discourse that views culture (understood as modernity) or its absence as the dividing line between those who value civic coexistence and those who espouse violence (Mamdani, 2004). This paradigm treats modern political movements that capitalize on Islam (such as Islamists) as primordial cultural or religious entities, which are inherently opposed to what’s believed to be progressive, secular values. Such a paradigm requires that a judgment value be placed on Muslims on the basis of compatibility of their form of Islam (manifested in their actions) with those values. Against this backdrop, some Tatars, the older generation in particular, are concerned not only about Tatars’ loss of their ethnic identity (manifested in the language loss), but also their traditional religious identity, which is associated with the Hanafi *madhhab* exclusively.

In this context, one’s sources of religious knowledge and physical manifestations of piety—such as the way one performs the five daily prayers, dresses, eats—are treated as transparent markers of one’s religious identity, whether or not they can legitimately be treated as such. Based on that, I argue that practicing Muslims are not only aware of stereotypical perceptions formed on the basis of one’s sources of religious knowledge or physical practices, but find communicative strategies to deal with such perceptions. One

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have been openly questioned by academics specializing in research on present-day Islam and ethno-religious relations in Russia/Tatarstan (see, for example, Iskhakov (2013b); Titova (2012); Isaev, n.d.).

<sup>223</sup> The purpose of this chapter is not to address the veracity of this claim. I would suggest, however, that a more productive approach to understanding the dynamics of different forms of Islam present in Tatarstan is to start by asking what practicing a certain kind of Islam means for a Muslim at the *individual* level in the context of the *everyday* life. In other words, the focus, I believe, should be on understanding what one does with a certain type of religious knowledge.

such strategy is (re)negotiating their religious identities at the discursive level, in a personal narrative by commenting on the theological or moral legitimacy of one's sources of religious knowledge or one's physical practices, as two piety stories analyzed below illustrate.

### **(Not) Talking About Sources of Religious Knowledge**

During my field research, few women explicitly mentioned a specific branch of Islam as a key element in their religious identity or explained why they practiced a certain Islamic tradition. This could be due to their and my initial assumption that as Tatars they were Hanafi. It could be due to the relative unimportance of the issue for (those) women: a recent survey-based sociological study<sup>224</sup> illustrates that practicing Muslim Tatar women tend to be more tolerant, compared to men, when it comes to people with alternative religious, ethnic, and political affiliations. But it could also point to the women's desire to avoid the potentially sensitive subject altogether and leave it to men who, as imams, make theological decisions. However, when I asked women about the way they came to Islam, their piety stories often began with a narrative about their original teachers and sources of Islamic knowledge. In their narratives, women did not simply name those sources and move on to the next subject, but painstakingly commented on the quality and nature of their sources of Islam as something that would reflect on the kind of Muslims they are. I argue that such a narrative move reflects practicing Muslim Tatar women's awareness of the fact that one's sources of religious knowledge are treated as true indicators of one's faith. But more importantly, such a

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<sup>224</sup> Nurullina (2010), p. 134.



communicative move gives women an opportunity to negotiate their own religious identities by identifying as morally or theologically legitimate those sources of religious knowledge that set them on the way to piety. Malika's story is a case in point.

I met Malika in the summer of 2009 through her husband, an imam of a small town in the suburbs of Kazan. I asked him to introduce me to Malika because I was intrigued by her combination of education (multilingual university graduate) and age (early thirties). As mentioned above, I had observed that, compared to practicing Muslim Tatar women in their mid teens and twenties on the one hand, and those in their late fifties and older on the other, there were fewer practicing Muslim Tatar women in their thirties and forties. Malika and her contemporaries had come of age during the 1990s when the former Soviet Union was at the peak of political, economic, and social transitions, as well as at a crisis of the existing system of values. While it was then that the Tatars enjoyed a vigorous ethnic revival, Muslim revival was one part of it, and not the powerful force in its own right that it has become over the past decade.

On her suggestion, I interviewed Malika at a local *medrese* where she taught weekend classes. The conversation took place in Russian (with Malika's occasional insertions of Arabic and Tatar). Throughout her narrative about her path to Islam, Malika did not address the question of *madhhabs*—Muslim schools of law—directly. Rather, she strove to present herself, her sources of religious knowledge, and generally, people who contributed to her road to piety—her Tatar mother and her Arab teachers—as proper, reasonable, trustworthy, and moral individuals. Doing so enabled Malika to position her teachers as morally or theologically legitimate sources of her Muslim knowledge, which also reflected on the kind of Islam she embraced: legitimate.

I identify Malika's husband's religious education as a reason for her need to legitimize the kind of Islam that they, as a family, practice. An ethnic Tatar, he received his theological education in the Middle East where she accompanied him after their marriage. In the context of present-day claims that Tatars (or other Muslims living in Russia) bring radical Islam from studying abroad (the Middle East in particular), a Muslim's foreign theological education could serve as grounds for questioning his or her loyalty to what's considered the legitimate form of Islam, associated with the Hanafi school of Muslim law. I further suggest that Malika is aware of—and thus feels the need to dispel—common Tatar stereotypes associated with Islam today, as Tatars debate over the extent and type of Islam that should be part of their lives. In her story below, Malika first talks about her mother as her first religious teacher and describes her mother's attempt to teach Malika how to pray. She then recounts her experience of continuing her religious education at a Kazan mosque and explains what Islam is. Finally, Malika recalls her participation in a summer camp organized by Arab students as a definitive moment on her road to piety.

*Malika's story:*

- M: 1. Well, of course, *Allah tügalä* [Tat. 'God, the Exalted'] gave me Islam from pure  
 2. hands after all, I think, because um gradually, when *äni* [Tat. 'Mom']—I am still  
 3. little—I don't know, I am maybe fifteen, my mom [stands] me for *namaz*<sup>225</sup>  
 4. [Tat. 'ritual prayer']: "Let's, *namazga bas*" [Tat. 'stand for namaz']. I stand for  
 5. *namaz* next to her; I don't understand anything, but I obey her...out of respect  
 6. for my parent, I obey her. I don't need all that; my thoughts are far away; I was  
 7. probably watching a movie then, right? I am simply repeating like a robot; I  
 8. don't even understand what a *rakagat* [Ru. 'unit of namaz'] is, like a brick in  
 9. *namaz*, and she is scolding me, I recall, for not understanding such a simple  
 10. thing ((*smiling*)). Well, this is how it all was. Then I started going to a mosque,

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<sup>225</sup> A set expression in both Russian and Tatar to indicate that someone encouraged a Muslim to begin performing *namaz*, which is often considered a turning point toward piety.

11. to Märjani.<sup>226</sup> Back then, Märjani was the only functioning mosque [in Kazan],  
 12. and when I was a college student, it was, I'll tell you ninety-, no I was in high  
 13. school then, it was ninety...three, they began to rebuild Nurulla, the Nurulla  
 14. mosque;<sup>227</sup> it's a Hay mosque<sup>228</sup> at the corner, across from the Kamal Theater.<sup>229</sup>  
 15. So and they quickly-quickly built mosques in Kazan for the [next] ten years. But  
 16. before then, when I was little, Märjani was the only functioning mosque. And  
 17. there they began to give active lessons in the nineties, at the beginning of the  
 18. nineties. I used to travel there; I had an *abïstay* [Tat. 'female religious  
 19. authority'] with whom I studied, but it didn't particularly touch me that deeply=  
 L: 20. =What were you taught [there]?  
 M: 21. ((*Sigh*)) Well, *namaz*, specifically=  
 L: 22. =Arabic?  
 M: 23. No, why? Islam is not Arabic. Islam is knowledge about the Creator, in general,  
 24. how to understand Him. Submission to Him, how to submit to Him. And  
 25. specifically, *namaz*, *taharüt* [Tat. 'ablution'], *namaz*. And there are lot of subtle  
 26. moments that each Muslim studies, and having studied them, performs them,  
 27. and it all eas- becomes easy for him.<sup>230</sup> So, and in ninety-two in Kazan, students,  
 28. Arabs, organized—well religious Arabs—because later I graduated from the  
 29. foreign languages department in Kazan=  
 L: 30. =What university?  
 M: 31. the X University.  
 L: 32. the X University?  
 M: 33. Yes, the Y department, and there was a lot of contacts with Arabs. They are  
 34. actually very different,<sup>231</sup> and the religious ones among them—the ones who  
 35. really—the ones who happened to find themselves in the Russian realities and  
 36. they keep Islam, there are very few of those, actually. They get lost here, they  
 37. begin to get into all sins, get into all heavy sins here ((*smiling*)). But these ones  
 38. were students from another [Russian] city, and they studied to be medical  
 39. doctors, so they were respectable, good people, rational.  
 [portion omitted]  
 40. So these Arabs, Muslims, in the summer of ninety-two organized a summer  
 41. camp for kids, for those interested, and *äni* somehow learned about it and signed  
 42. me up there. I really liked it there, of course; there were very interesting lectures  
 43. [there]. I was a rational girl, and I liked listening to all that. And ((*smiling*))  
 44. basically, you can ask anyone, they often say that [it is] like a flash, it really is,  
 45. faith, *Allah tūgalū* opens [it] in [one's] heart. So, it's like something, you can  
 46. even pinpoint a fraction of a second when you became a Muslim, you see? It's a  
 47. very interesting state. A lecture is taking place; the lecture is given by this Arab,  
 48. and he says: "For example, there is one person who worked all his life and made

<sup>226</sup> Name of Kazan's chief mosque, titled after a prominent Tatar thinker of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the only mosque allowed to function during the Soviet era.

<sup>227</sup> Another old prominent mosque in Kazan.

<sup>228</sup> The Nurulla mosque is referred to as the "hay mosque" because of a once-adjacent hay market.

<sup>229</sup> Professional Tatar Theater in Kazan.

<sup>230</sup> Malika most likely uses a third person masculine pronoun to convey an abstract, formal style. The usage is not politically incorrect.

<sup>231</sup> Malika means here that not all Arabs are pious Muslims, as many Tatars tend to think.

49. savings, and another robbed him. The thief was not caught, but...um the hard  
 50. worker lives in poverty until his death, while the other one [is] in luxury all his  
 51. life until his death So there is a lot of injustice... in this world...And there will, of  
 52. course, be the Judgment day.” He says that there will be the Judgment day  
 53. where *Allah tägalä* will restore all rights and will punish...all, and there will be  
 54. an absolute justice. And all of a sudden, a realization comes that indeed, such  
 55. great creations like the Earth, the human being, the human community – all of  
 56. this is not a toy, it’s not for games, it’s not for fun, it’s not for merry-making,  
 57. that we’ll be responsible for all of this, and that...I, too, must be in it.

Malika begins her story by identifying her mother as her first religious teacher and recollecting memories about her first experience with *namaz*, the ritual prayer (lines 1-10). I argue that at the beginning of her narrative, Malika does not simply identify her first religious teacher—her mother—but also comments on the qualities of the teacher and her Islam as an indicator of the kind of Islam Malika inherited from her mother and practices today. She does this by saying that, without a doubt, “*Allah tägalä*” [Tat. ‘God, the Exalted’], gave her Islam from “pure hands” (lines 1-2), the hands of *äni*, her Tatar mother who, when she was fifteen or so, encouraged her to stand next to her for *namaz*. By referring to her mother in Tatar (line 2) and by invoking in Tatar her mother’s request that Malika stand for prayer (lines 3-4), Malika creates an association between her mother’s Islam and Tatar identity. Thus, without identifying a specific school of Muslim law, Malika creates an impression that her Tatar mother practiced the kind of Islam that could not possibly be considered foreign vis-a-vis her Tatar identity (such as Wahabi or Salafi Islam), thereby legitimizing her mother’s faith from the theological point of view. Malika further legitimizes her mother’s—and thus her own—faith by metaphorically describing her mother’s hands as “pure” (line 1). Malika uses the metaphor to comment on her mother’s character. If then, her Tatar mother was a “pure” woman, the kind of Islam she practiced and passed on to Malika could not have been immoral. Finally, by

stating in the very first sentence that “*Allah tägalä*” gave her Islam (from her mother’s pure hands), Malika identifies God himself as the ultimate source of her faith. Thus, the faith that she practices is divine and pure by definition.

Malika continues her story by talking about a Kazan mosque where she attended informal religious lessons taught by an *abıstay*, a Tatar female religious teacher (lines 10-19). Malika noted that she originally learned how to pray more out of respect for her mother than her own interest in religion (lines 5-6); neither was she “touched” by the mosque lessons, as she put it (line 19). It was at a summer camp organized by Arab students studying in Kazan where Malika’s formative religious experience—a revelation of faith—took place. Before describing that moment (lines 54-57), Malika makes an effort to comment on the camp organizers—the Arabs who organized and taught at the camp (lines 33-39).

Malika makes sure to describe the “Arabs” that set up the camp and were her religious teachers as “respectable, good people, rational” (line 39). However, Malika does not simply refer to her Arab teachers as such; she goes into two digressions to explain what those qualities actually mean. In the first instance, Malika directly links the meaning of those adjectives to piety when she describes them as “religious ones...the ones who happened to find themselves in the Russian realities and they keep Islam” (lines 33-36). In the second instance, Malika assigns meaning to her understanding of “respectable,” “good,” and “rational” in a more subtle way. She does it in lines 48-54 by evoking one of her Arab teacher’s lectures on “absolute justice” (line 54). I argue that the Arab’s message of a possibility of such justice would resonate with many in the post-Soviet context, as it did with Malika herself who identified the lecture as a key moment in her

spiritual development (lines 54-57). By crediting her Arab teacher with her sense of renewed *personal* responsibility for “the human community” (lines 54-57), Malika implies that to be “respectable,” “good,” and “rational” is to be, first and foremost, moral, and as such, a source of legitimate religious knowledge, legitimate Islam.

Malika’s evaluation of her camp teachers was directly linked to her evaluation of herself when she said that she liked her Arab teachers’ lectures because she was “a rational girl” (lines 42-43). By saying that, like her teachers, Malika was “rational,” she implies that she shared in her teacher’s moral values of justice and responsibility. Therefore, as someone who could not possibly embrace a faith that was morally questionable, Malika signals her own sense of morality. Finally, I argue that, by providing the listener with enough evidence to conclude that the kind of Islam she practices is based on the kind of people it came from—“respectable,” “good,” “rational” and thus moral—Malika asserts a sense of agency.

Malika’s attempt to create a positive image of the kind of Islam she embraced was tied to stereotypes that co-exist among both practicing and non-practicing Muslim Tatars today, the stereotypes that Malika was trying to dispel. Both stereotypes are associated with “Arabs,” the way I observed Tatars to routinely refer to people from what they perceive to be “the Arab world.” When during my fieldwork I probed several Tatars who used the term to explain to me what they mean by “the Arab world,” the Middle East was a frequent response.<sup>232</sup> Therefore, the term “Arabs” signifies a collective identity of sorts, which, I argue, can be better understood through the stereotypes Malika evokes.

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<sup>232</sup> According to historian Allen Frank (A. Frank, personal communication, May 12, 2013), pre-revolutionary sources indicate that at the time, Tatars used the term “*Garabstan*” (the same term that some of my interviewees used to refer to the “Arab world”) to refer to the Hijaz province. Geographically, the Hijaz province coincided with a region that is now in the west of Saudi Arabia and contains Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Present-day use of the term “*Garabstan*” to refer to the “Arab world” as in “the Middle East” may reflect the development of Arab nationalism.

One such belief suggests that all Arabs are proper Muslims and thus all Arabs are an authority when it comes to Islam. This view also comes through in the narrative of Farida, another young practicing Muslim woman whose story is analyzed below. Malika breaks this stereotype by establishing a distinction between her pious teachers and other non-pious Arabs she met while in school. Another stereotype, particularly shared by younger Tatars who consider themselves secular, older observant Tatars, and some non-Tatars, suggests that Muslim foreign nationals who come to Russia to study, work, or for other reasons, introduce to the Tatars radical, foreign Islam (routinely referred to as Wahhabi or Salafi, regardless of one's actual *madhhab*).<sup>233</sup> Just like Tatars who received their theological education in the Middle East, these foreign nationals are often blamed for adulterating and destroying the Hanafi school of law, traditionally espoused by the Tatars. For Malika, whose husband studied in the Middle East and whose spiritual teachers were Arabs, this stereotype could translate into some Tatars' questioning of her "Tatariness" and loyalty to Hanafi Islam.

Moreover, popular (non-expert) understandings of different types of Islam are often based on physical manifestations of piety that are often compared against what's believed to "the norm" (an issue I discuss at length below). One example is a popular sentiment that Tatar women never covered their hair unless for prayer, or if they did, they tied their scarves in the back, showing their necks. This type of image-based tension over a Tatar woman's identity has been a recurring theme among many of my interviewees. I

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<sup>233</sup> For example, in 2001-2003 the Russian government started closing "*Turetskie Litsei*" [Ru. 'Turkish Schools'], secondary schools founded and taught throughout the former Soviet Union in the 1990s by Turkish nationals. In Tatarstan, these schools were closed down in 2007-2008, and all Turkish and other foreign nationals working at the schools were sent out of the country. While the official version of the closedown was often related to violations of labor law, Mukhariamova and Andreeva (2008) suggest that Russia's national security officials claimed that the schools were spreading ideas of pan-Turkism and extremist Islam via religious education, and thus were a threat to Russia's national security.

also personally experienced it on a number of occasions in the field while wearing a headscarf that carefully covered my hair and neck. In one instance, an older Tatar woman with whom I shared public space pointed at me and regretted out loud that young Tatar women preferred to tie their scarves “the Arab way.”

Finally, a recent wave of local authorities’ bans on headscarves in Russia’s public schools generated lawsuits and a heated public discussion.<sup>234</sup> It prompted Russia’s President Vladimir Putin to make the following public statement in a recent press conference: “When it comes to hijabs: you know that in our culture (when I say - “our,” I mean traditional Islam) hijabs don’t exist. . . . And we are going to implement traditions that are foreign to us – why? And, of course, we all have to pay attention to this, and talk about it directly, and refer, in this case of course, to the representatives of traditional Islam.”<sup>235</sup> In this context, one must perform a tough balancing act to appear as a Muslim who is pious enough, but not fanatically religious as to be accused of being “radical” and thus potentially dangerous. Malika, whose husband studied in the Middle East, whose own spiritual teachers were Arabs, and who wore long skirts and carefully covered her head and neck with a headscarf, used her piety story to qualify her sources of religious knowledge—as indicators of her Islam—as morally and theologically legitimate.

### **Embodied Practices as Markers of One’s Religious Identity**

Malika was not unique in elaborating on the sources and teachers of her religious knowledge while sharing her story with me. Farida, a second-generation practicing

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<sup>234</sup> For specific cases, see footnote 53.

<sup>235</sup> My translation from Russian. The exact words are as follows: “Что касается хиджабов: Вы знаете, ведь в нашей культуре (когда я говорю – нашей, я имею в виду традиционный ислам) никаких хиджабов нет. [. . .] А мы у себя будем внедрять чуждые нам традиции – зачем? И конечно, мы все должны на это обращать внимание, и прямо об этом говорить, и опираться в данном случае, конечно, на представителей традиционного ислама” (Official website of the Russian President Vladimir Putin, <http://президент.рф/news/17173>).



woman in her early twenties, felt compelled to explain to me her parents' choice of religious teachers as indicators of their and her religious identity—an identity that she had adopted at an early age as part of her family's religious practice. Unlike Malika, Farida belonged to a younger generation of practicing Muslims who were either raised by observant parents or have become pious in light of the recent Islamic revival. I met and interviewed Farida in the fall of 2009 at the Russian Islamic University (RIU) in Kazan<sup>236</sup> where at the time she was a student and employee. Unlike Malika, who first became interested in religion during her adolescent years, Farida had been wearing a headscarf by the age of ten when she and her practicing Muslim Tatar mother moved to Tatarstan from the Fergana Valley (Uzbekistan) to join her maternal grandmother upon her father's early death. While Farida indicated that she had been interested in religion since early childhood, she did not pinpoint a single moment of revelation like Malika did. Given the fact that Farida was raised by a practicing mother and, later, a practicing Muslim Tatar stepfather, Farida was not “newly” pious. Her parents, however, became practicing Muslims as adults, and Farida spoke about their religious teachers as an indicator of the kind of Islam the family practiced.

Similarly to Malika's narrative, Farida's story illustrates Tatars' concern over the role of Islam as part of their identity and future. Using her parents and a young imam at a local mosque as examples, Farida shows that the general public often perceives sources and teachers of Islamic knowledge as true indicators of one's Muslim identity—

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<sup>236</sup> Founded in 1998, RIU is another Kazan higher educational institution popular among Russia's Muslims. Indirectly supported by the Tatarstan and Federal governments (mostly through grants), RIU offers degrees in both secular and religious disciplines. RIU is also believed to serve as a moderating force to alternative forms of Islam taking a foothold in Russia. For example, its website states that Hanafi is the dominant religious school adopted by the university. Many of my interviewees were simultaneously enrolled at the Mukhammadiia madrasa and RIU to be able to get “solid” religious knowledge from the former and a state-certified diploma of higher education from the latter, as they would often explain it to me.

something about which Malika also indirectly spoke. Farida's account of her family's and local youth's religious practices demonstrates that for many Tatars, struggle over the kind of Islam they should embrace rests largely at the personal level of everyday embodied (physical) practices and religious rituals, as opposed to more abstract theological underpinnings of different Islamic traditions.

This is not only due to the highly prescribed, ritualistic nature of Muslim piety, which ties the theological knowledge to physical practice (Mahmood, 2005), but also due to the Russian imperial and later soviet religious policies. They stripped Islam of its theological essence and forced it out of the fabric of everyday life into the realm of ethnic customs and rituals that marked life-changing occasions. Therefore, for the majority of post-Soviet Muslims embodied practices associated with life-changing events—not theological knowledge itself, or theological knowledge embodied in the daily observance—represent the realm of the familiar, the religious “norm.” As Farida's narrative illustrates, the general public, and even Muslims themselves, rely on the physical manifestations of Muslim piety to determine one's religious—and by default other—loyalties.

After collecting some basic demographic information, I began my interview by asking Farida to share her path to Muslim piety with me. I spoke with Farida for over three hours. I analyze part of her story, which I broke down into segments for ease of comprehension. In the first data segment below, Farida opens her story by recalling the earliest religious experiences she could remember and links it to her mother's religious transformation:

*Farida's story – segment # 1*

- F: 1. Since childhood, I longed for religion...and since childhood I searched...one  
2. can say, I was in search for religion. My parents were not pious then, but now  
3. they are pious, **Alhamdulillah** [Ar. 'Thank God'],<sup>237</sup> Muslims. And I always  
4. was in search for...the Truth.<sup>238</sup> So, there was a feeling...eh...when He, God, is  
5. near you, you don't see Him, but you always feel Him and start looking for  
6. Him. Start looking for a way to communicate with Him, a way to worship Him,  
7. and you want Him to answer you...you want to ask Him questions=  
L: 8. =When did this need emerge?  
F: 9. It was when I was five already.  
L: 10. Already? Uhum.  
F: 11. So, it started at five...and I asked my mom to buy me a Bible=  
L: 12. = Why a Bible?  
F: 13. Because I didn't know that there was...Well, our Tatars are such an  
14. ethnicity<sup>239</sup>... secular; they are not interested in their own religion, unlike  
15. Russians. Russians, they always know that [there is] *bozhen'ka* [Ru. 'dear  
16. Lord'], "Christ, and all that; they know all this.  
[portion omitted]  
17. So. I had asked for a Bible, and I had a Bible. [...] Then I asked my mom to  
18. buy me a cross, all that, I wanted to have some religious relics at home.  
[portion omitted]  
19. So, and my mom gave it to me because I myself wanted it...I wore it..., but  
20. then my mom began searching ((laughs)). So, it was somehow a parallel process  
21. between us, and in a year, she studied all all all, many religions, [to find what's]  
22. suitable, and she didn't pay attention to her own religion, maybe because [she  
23. had] originally [assumed that] a Tatar – means being a Muslim, right? And then  
24. she started studying Islam, and that was it; she definitely came to Islam within a  
25. year. She began, she already was going to a madrasa, studied there, and then a  
26. take-off began.  
L: 27. It was there, where you lived?  
F: 28. Yes. Then she left for Moscow, studied with Arabs...for half a year, [she] put  
29. on her headscarf. That was it, she became a serious Muslim.

Similarly to Malika, Farida began her story by going back to her younger years when she felt the need to have a religious experience (lines 1-7). Unlike Malika, however, who attributed her path to Muslim piety at least in part to her Tatar mother, Farida at the outset questioned Tatars' interest in their religion. In response to my

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<sup>237</sup> Literal translation from Arabic is "Praise be to God/Allah," but in everyday life Muslim use the phrase as "Thank God," which is considered an act of piety.

<sup>238</sup> I capitalize the word throughout when Farida uses it in connection with religious experience, as opposed to a reference to a fact of life.

<sup>239</sup> Farida uses the term "*natsia*."

question why she asked her Tatar mother to buy her a Bible, Farida did not attribute her own lack of knowledge about other religions, including Islam, to her mother, but, indirectly, to the fact that her mother was a Tatar, and “Tatars are such an ethnicity, secular; they are not interested in their own religion, unlike Russians” (lines 13-14). Using her Tatar mother as an example, Farida further clarified what she perceived as an average Tatar’s lack of interest in religion: “she didn’t pay attention to her own religion, maybe because [she had] originally [assumed that] a Tatar – means being a Muslim, right?” (lines 22-23).

Farida’s questioning of an average Tatar’s conflation of ethnic and religious identity is illustrative of a recent trend among the growing number of practicing Muslim Tatars, particularly the younger generation, to differentiate ethnic and religious elements of their identity. Similarly to Malika, Farida explained her need to have religious experience as an internal, deeply personal, and thus divine, call. However, in contrast to Malika, Farida used her Tatar mother as an example to question Tatars’ legitimacy as “serious” Muslims. It was not, after all, until after Farida’s mother travelled to Moscow to study with Arabs for half-a-year that she became “a serious Muslim,” an indication of which was her putting on the headscarf (lines 28-29).

There are certain parallels between Malika’s and Farida’s narratives. However, unlike Malika who directly linked her faith to the “pure” hands of her Tatar mother, Farida expresses doubt about Tatars’ relationship to their religion. This is not to say that Farida does not identify as Tatar altogether. Born in Central Asia to a Tatar mother and a

father who belonged to one the Pamir region's ethnic groups,<sup>240</sup> Farida moved to Tatarstan with her mother at the age of ten, following her father's death, to join her Tatar grandmother and other Tatar family members. A fluent Tatar speaker, she graduated among the top of her class from a Tatar school. Her mother transferred Farida from a regular Russian school at the suggestion of the Russian-school principal who believed that, as the only child wearing a headscarf, Farida would feel more comfortable in the Tatar school. Farida said she was grateful to the principal for the suggestion, as she did feel more comfortable in the Tatar school. Furthermore, Farida had a lot of respect for her Tatar stepfather and his family, as she conveyed to me. When at the beginning of our conversation I asked Farida if she was a Tatar, her response was: "Um, yes, well, not a full-blooded Tatar, half-Tatar; my mom is a Tatar, and my dad is a Pamiri." Her connection to Tatar ethnicity is also seen in line 13, where Farida refers to Tatars as "our Tatars." Therefore, while Farida questions the way Tatars relate to their religion, her own relationship to "Tatarness" is not an uncomplicated one. This relationship illustrates separation of religious and ethnic aspects of identity, a recent phenomenon.

Farida continued her narrative by commenting on how the way she and her family practice Islam daily might set them apart from the majority of Tatars. Her focus on the daily practices underscores my earlier observation that one's religious affiliation is often judged on the basis of one's physical manifestations of Muslim piety. In the following excerpt, Farida first identifies her family as "very religious" and then explains which specific practices make others perceive the family as "*vakhabyt*" [Ru. 'Wahhabi'].<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> The Pamir region is inhabited by ethnic groups who share the Indo-Iranian origin. The majority practice Ismailism (a branch of Shia Islam); some practice Sunni Islam. In her story, Farida did not identify her father's religious identity or whether her father was religious altogether.

<sup>241</sup> Throughout her narrative, Farida used the word "*vakhabyt*," the Russian version of the word "Wahhabi." For more on the meaning of the word "Wahhabi," see footnote 50.

*Farida's story – segment # 2*

[portion omitted]

F: 30. Well, our family is very religious, **Alhamdulillah** [Ar. 'Thank God']. So that  
31. there are even people, there are even people who call us **Wahhabi** (*lower*  
32. *voice*)), but we are not **Wahhabi**, we don't think we are **Wahhabi**, we are not  
33. terrorists, we are nobody=

L: 34. Why do [they] call [you] so?

F: 35. Because of the strict attitude toward religion, because of the strict attitude toward  
36. all the forbidden, to all that is allowed. So, all matters, for- there is no "this is  
37. allowed, this is easy, this can be skipped." For them everything is strict.

L: 38. Can you [explain with] specific examples?

F: 39. Sure. For example, Tatars have such concept as **ashlar ütkärü** [Tat. 'carrying out  
40. religious dinners'],<sup>242</sup> right? And, **alar** [Tat. 'they'] are not against **ashlar**  
41. **ütkärü**, but **alar** against men and women sitting, kind of together, kind of in one  
42. room. Or **nikakhtar ütkärü bergä**<sup>243</sup> [Tat. 'performing Muslim marriages  
43. ceremonies jointly']. They believe that men should be sitting apart from women;  
44. it's in accordance with the **Shariah** [Ar. 'Muslim normative law']. So, um, there  
45. are these kinds of nuances, with which they do not agree; they don't do them=

L: 46. =Can you give more examples?

F: 47. Um, there are people, let's say, who, if there is wine in a cake, say that, "it does  
48. not," like, "intoxicate, why?" But my parents will never eat such cake, never  
49. ever. Or, they are even scrupulous when it comes to such things, as...gelatin,<sup>244</sup>  
50. for example, is present in food [...] We:::ll, even for such basic things, [they] tell  
51. my mom: "why do you wear<sup>245</sup> your scarf in front; wear [it] in the back," or=

L: 52. =Does she tie it in the front?

F: 53. Yes. Or, she is very, well, she always wears a very loose hijab, so she, she  
54. doesn't have tight clothes, she does not allow [herself to wear] such kind of  
55. clothes. As I remember since childhood, she has always had a loose dress, so it  
56. stayed the way it always has been, she **tekerä** [Tat. 'sews'] only loose [clothes],  
57. so and she even scolds me, say, if my blouses, say, a bit deviate from the  
58. **Shariah** norm, and if I, say, wear pants with a tunic, she says that my tunics  
59. should be below my knees. She has very, has always been very strict when it  
60. comes to my clothes. A:::nd the fact that I use mascara, so that, well...to hide  
61. some imperfections [...]

[portion omitted]

62. [...] a:::nd my mom has been strict even when it comes to things like that  
63. (*quieter voice*)), like, "it's forbidden"=

<sup>242</sup> This Tatar phrase literally translates as "carrying out dinners/meals" and refers to a Tatar tradition of a religious gathering at a dinner table with the purpose of reciting of the Qur'an, saying prayers, socializing, and enjoying the meal.

<sup>243</sup> This Tatar phrase literally translates as "carrying out joint Muslim marriages" and refers to a Muslim marriage ceremony where male and female guests are present in the same room.

<sup>244</sup> Because gelatin can contain pig elements, some Muslims exclude it from their diets.

<sup>245</sup> Meaning "tie."

L: 64. =Make up is forbidden, right?=  
F: 65. =Yes, “make up is forbidden; beauty is only for [one’s] husband,” and all that.

66. My dad...is even stricter ((*smiling*)).

Unlike Malika, Farida was unusually explicit in discussing the kind of Islam she and her family practice. As I mentioned earlier, most women I interviewed about their path to Muslim piety did not engage in the issue of *madhhabs* directly, even though it is at the center of the current Muslim revival. Farida, however, openly admitted that some call her family “Wahhabi” and quickly countered the claim (lines 31-33). This indicates that Farida is well aware of the stereotype-based discourse around—and labels attached to—those who exhibit “the strict attitude toward religion” (line 35).

To give a sense of the meaning and usage behind the term “Wahhabi” (or “Wahhabism”) in the post-Soviet discursive space, I refer to Emelianova (2003), who, while pointing out that theologically speaking, it is incorrect to apply the term “Wahhabism” to what she calls “post-Soviet Islamic fundamentalism,” uses the term “due to the term’s wide acceptance by politicians and journalists” (p. 245). My own field observations indicate that the term “Wahhabi” (or “Wahhabism”) is often used by the general public to refer to a range of Muslim practices that deviate from what they believe to be a religious “norm.” At best, the term can refer to what’s believed to be a very conservative form of Islam, characterized by literal interpretation of and blind obedience in the following of the Qur’an and *ahadith* [Ar. accounts of exemplary sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad’], while dismissing the theological legitimacy of the *madhhabs*. At worst, the term can be associated with terrorism and applied by the government to those Muslims it wishes to suppress (A. Altstadt, personal communication, May 29, 2013). In either case, Islamic practices associated with Wahhabism are marked

by their departure from the local norm. In present-day Tatarstan, where non-practicing Tatars still constitute a majority, such a norm is largely limited to Muslim religious rituals observed only at special occasions, such as births, weddings, and deaths. Anything more than that may be treated as “too conservative,” “too strict,” and thus a deviation. Furthermore, because Muslim piety is enacted through gender-specific practices, gender is at the center of the discourse on what constitutes religious norms.

As someone who likely dealt with this issue in the past, Farida did not hesitate to give examples of what can constitute such a norm, and what can be considered “foreign” and thus “Wahhabi.” She began by saying that what made her family “Wahhabi” in the eyes of some was their strict attitude “toward all the forbidden, all that is allowed” as opposed to “this is allowed, this is easy, this can be skipped” (lines 35-37). By juxtaposing the two attitudes and by using double-voicing (citing the words of others in lines 36-37), Farida implies that “the norm” is such an attitude toward religion where “this is allowed, this is easy, this can be skipped.” Furthermore, in lines 39-45, using *nikakh* [Tat. ‘Muslim marriage ceremony’], and the Tatar religious tradition of *ashlar ütkärü* [Tat. ‘carrying out of religious social gatherings accompanied by a formal meal, prayers, and Qur’an recitations’], Farida more specifically explained that her family’s preference, “in accordance with the Shariah,” that men and women sit in separate spaces was considered outside the norm. The fact that Farida refers to these Tatar traditions in Tatar indicates her familiarity with them, as well as her ability to separate the cultural (Tatar) component from the religious (Muslim) one.

In the course of my fieldwork, I attended about a dozen Muslim public and private events where space was divided along gender lines in one way or another. One



such private event was a female-only *iftar* [Ar. ‘fast-breaking dinner during Ramadan’] organized by Rufina, a practicing Tatar woman, a university student in her early twenties, in her Kazan rental apartment in the summer of 2009.<sup>246</sup> The majority of Kazan’s mosques also held *iftar* dinners in separate rooms for men and women. Several of Kazan’s higher educational institutions allowed their students to organize *iftar* dinners on the premises (a tradition that has continued to take place every year), and since situating men and women in separate dining areas would be logistically difficult in those secular public institutions, young men and women sat in the same dining hall but at separate tables. In that case, the division along gender lines was less obvious but still present since no men and women were sitting at the same table.

I also attended about half a dozen *ashlar* [Tat. religious social gatherings accompanied by a formal meal, prayers, and Qur’an recitations’] organized by older (fifties and up) Tatar women I had met while sitting in at informal mosque lessons at two different Kazan mosques. In one instance, a dinner was held at the same mosque where lessons took place; like the lessons, it was female-only. In another instance, a dinner was organized by a sixty-year-old female, a mosque-lessons student, at a café where she worked and her family owned. The division along gender lines was marked by men and women sitting at the different ends of one long table. While these examples illustrate that space division along gender lines is becoming more commonplace among practicing Muslim Tatars, it is still a rarity for the majority of the population.<sup>247</sup>

In a recent interview, Gamil Nur, a Tatar activist and a showman who specializes in providing entertainment for observant Muslim Tatars’ weddings, suggested that

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<sup>246</sup> In chapter 4 that introduced piety stories, I analyze an excerpt of interaction that took place during that dinner.

<sup>247</sup> Peshkova (2009) provides an insightful discussion on Uzbek Muslim women’s use of domestic space.

alcohol-free weddings with some form of division along gender lines were becoming a norm (Nur, 2012). However, he noted that in his estimation they constituted only one-to-two percent of all large-scale weddings taking place in Tatarstan. Based on my field observations, I suggest that such a small number can be explained, among other factors, by the fact that observant Muslim Tatars often prefer to hold small wedding ceremonies at home. The estimate, nonetheless, demonstrates that the division of space along gender lines is a rarity, at least when it comes to large-scale private events such as weddings. It is no wonder, then, that Farida's parents' preference to hold social—even if religious—gatherings in separate spaces was considered outside the norm and an indication of their “radical” religious identity.

Farida's parents' diligence with alcohol- and gelatin-containing products (47-50) and her mother's choice of loose, long dresses along with the headscarves tied in the front (50-60) can also be considered practices that, for many Tatars, deviate from what's believed to be “the norm.” As I have mentioned in my analysis of Malika's story, in the course of my field work, I became aware that it was common to hear among Tatars, particularly an older generation, the sentiment that Tatar women never covered their heads and/or necks or that Tatars never gathered in separate spaces along gender lines. However, ethnographic research indicates that, historically, Muslim Tatars practiced separate festivities for men and women and that the practice began to disappear only after the Bolshevik Revolution.<sup>248</sup> Similarly, Suslova<sup>249</sup> suggests that Tatar women historically covered their heads and that changes to the tradition began taking place only in the mid-

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<sup>248</sup> R. Mukhamedova, “Pischa i domashniaia utvar” in D. Iskhakov (Ed.) *Etnografiia tatarskogo naroda*, (Kazan: Magarif, 2004), 103-109; Raufa Urazmanova, “Semeinye obychai i obriady” in D. Iskhakov (Ed.) *Etnografiia tatarskogo naroda*, (Kazan: Magarif, 2004), 127-140.

<sup>249</sup> S. Suslova, “Narodnaia odezhda” in D. Iskhakov (Ed.) *Etnografiia tatarskogo naroda* (Kazan: Magarif, 2004), 88-103.

1800s, while Tatar religious reformers did not engage in public discussions concerning the legality of the veil until after 1910.<sup>250</sup>

Based on my field observations, I suggest that present-day Tatar popular beliefs regarding gender and women issues are largely based on artifacts (such as photographs or family portraits), observed family practices and/or on popular discourses generated by the collective memories of the large group of people (an oral tradition of sorts)<sup>251</sup> that can only go back a generation or two.<sup>252</sup> This limited collective memory span is in great part due to the legacy of the Soviet state that prohibited both religious and ethnic education that would preserve and pass on cultural and religious knowledge. As illustrated in Farida's narrative above, they are, however, a reflection of an ongoing quest of what kind of Islam should define Tatar identity.

Farida's own religious identity is also complicated and reflects the intricacy of the present-day Muslim revival in Tatarstan. While she explains her mother's clothing choice as one of the reasons behind some people's assumptions that Farida's mother is a "Wahhabi," in lines 57-60 Farida simultaneously reveals both her mother's adherence to and her own occasional deviation from "the Shariah norm" when it comes to clothing. Similarly, in lines 60-63 Farida describes her use of make-up as a potential point of disagreement with her parents. When I met Farida, her own appearance did not easily match the stereotype associated with someone who is a "Wahhabi." While she was modestly dressed, wearing a headscarf, a long skirt, and a long-sleeve top, she did not

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<sup>250</sup> Azade-Ayşe Rorlich, *The Volga Tatars: A Profile in National Resilience* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1986), 63.

<sup>251</sup> See Eviatar Zerubavel. *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>252</sup> A recent wave of ban of headscarves in public schools and Putin's response to the issue (both discussed earlier in this chapter) prompted a Muslim Tatar theologian and public figure Rustam Batrov to write an internet article on the issue. In it, he summarizes popular views on headscarves and deconstructs them based on facts from the Tatar history and Muslim theology (Batrov, 2013).

wear a long loose dress like the one her mother prefers. Combined with a hint of make-up, her clothing style projected an image that did not set her apart from other practicing Muslim Tatar women her age, who always carefully covered their heads and body, but left some room for variation in style and make up.

As evident from Farida's story, Tatars' struggle over what kind of Islam they should practice rests largely at the personal level of bodily practices and rituals, as opposed to more abstract theological understandings of different Islamic traditions. While women are often at the center of the debate, men are not immune from gender-based stereotypes that simultaneously reflect and fuel the ongoing public and private discourses on what kind of Islam Tatars should practice. In the next data segment Farida continued to explain her family's religious practices, focusing this time on her stepfather's appearance as both an indicator of his strong faith and others' perception of the family's faith being outside the norm:

*Farida's story – segment # 3*

[portion omitted]

F: 67. And, so, my dad is very strict now. For example they say, "Why do you wear a  
68. beard?" He wears a beard, meaning it's **Sunnah** [Ar. 'normative conduct based  
69. on Muhammad's example']<sup>253</sup> of the Prophet; he will never give it up. There was  
70. even a time when, um, Muslims were incarcerated in our town, and, so,  
71. everyone was afraid to wear a beard, everyone was afraid to act as Muslims; they  
72. became like little mice. Even at such a moment he said: "**Tawakal Allahu**" [Ar.  
73. 'Trust God'],<sup>254</sup> and he did not shave off his beard then, he kept wearing it, and  
74. he still wears it<sup>255</sup> ((quiet voice)).

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<sup>253</sup> This word of Arabic origin today is widely used in both Tatar and Russian. Here, Farida uses Russian pronunciation of the word.

<sup>254</sup> *The Online Oxford Dictionary of Islam* explains that the Arabic word "Tawakkul" translates as "trust" and "refers to the Sufi practice of complete self-abandonment in God in order to do His will. Also indicates the Sufi's total reliance on God to provide for daily needs" ("Tawakkul," 2003).

<sup>255</sup> As a point of comparison, in early modern Russia, beards functioned as indicators of traditional, backwards versus progressive, modern identity, as indicated by Peter the Great's requirement, as part of his modernizing reforms, that all Russian (Christian) men in his day shave their beards.

Farida's discussion of her stepfather's practice of wearing a beard (lines 67-74) illuminates how a common perception of a gender-specific practice of wearing a beard reflects what is considered a norm, as well as a deviation from it. For Farida, her stepfather's decision to wear a beard was an act of piety: in their daily lives, Muslims are encouraged to emulate the actions of their Prophet (what is called "Sunnah") who wore a beard. Therefore, to wear a beard is to act like a Muslim. However, her father's decision to keep the beard even at a time when "Muslims were incarcerated" in their town (line 70) and when "everyone was afraid to wear a beard, everyone was afraid to act as Muslims" (line 71) also sets him apart as too strict—a "Wahhabi" in the eyes of others.

On a number of occasions during fieldwork, I witnessed Tatars discuss a man's skullcap and slightly rolled up trousers, combined with a longer beard, as indicators of his "foreign" religious identity. The fact that gender-specific physical manifestations of piety continue to serve as markers of a certain Islamic tradition is supported by a recent article on the website of *Umma*, the Tatarstan Spiritual Muslim Board-endorsed newspaper. The article talked about the presence of Tablighi Jamaat, an Indian reform movement banned in Russia as an international extremist organization, in Tatarstan among the local Tatars. The article caught my attention because it began with a physical description of a typical male representative of the organization:<sup>256</sup>

Today one can frequently see them in Tatarstan's mosques: dressed in typical Pakistani clothes, with odd-looking beards at least four fingers long, they often spend the night at the mosques. Just from their peculiar appearance, it is possible to understand that in front of you are the adherents of what for the Tatars is a foreign, non-traditional form of Islam such as "Tablighi Jamaat." (Nurly, 2011a)

The article was accompanied by a photograph of five bearded men dressed in this clothing who were standing in front of what looked like one of Kazan's mosques. In

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<sup>256</sup> My translation from Russian.

addition to the physical description of the organization's male members, the article also cited the group's insistence on strict division of space along gender lines (such as during a *nikakh*, a marriage ceremony) and women's conservative clothing style, as something "wild" [Ru. 'diko'] for traditionally Hanafi Tatars. The fact that the article was re-posted on the Tatarstan Spiritual Muslim Board's website<sup>257</sup> indicates that non-practicing and practicing Muslims alike rely on gender-specific outward expressions of faith to determine one's religious affiliation. Such attention to the question of the kind of Islam one espouses reflects both the Tatars' newfound interest in their religion and their anxiety "to get it right." As a result, one must often perform a tough balancing act to appear as a Muslim who is pious enough, but not fanatically religious as to be accused of being radical.

While religious practices often serve as indicators of one's religious identity, sources of religious knowledge—in other words, whom a Muslim considers religious authority—are also frequently treated as reliable markers of one's faith. When later in the conversation Farida described her stepfather as "very strict in the questions of *aqida*"—an Arabic term for Muslim articles of faith<sup>258</sup>—and as someone who "understands all that," I asked her where he had studied. Farida did not give a simple answer, but elaborated instead:

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<sup>257</sup> Nurly (2011b).

<sup>258</sup> This word of Arabic origin is becoming widely used by practicing Muslims in both Russian and Tatar. Here, even though Farida pronounces the word with Arabic accent, she conjugates the word in accordance with the Russian grammar ("v voprosakh akydy").

[portion omitted]

- F: 75. He's self-taught. He didn't study anywhere, but he completed a **hajj** [Ar. 76. 'Muslim pilgrimage'].<sup>259</sup> He...he traveled to Turkey, for example, to study, not 77. to study per se, to take some courses, he was taught by Turks. His first teachers 78. of Islam were Turks. And then he sort of gradually switched to Arabs, so to 79. speak, because the source is the Arabs. The source is the Arabs. The Prophet 80. himself was an Arab. So, how can we think that Turks have more knowledge 81. when the source of knowledge, those to whom the knowledge came, were the 82. Arabs, they are the bearers of it. In other words, no one, other than them, can 83. better know their religion, meaning from '**alim** [Ar. 'educated, 84. knowledgeable'],<sup>260</sup> from knowledgeable people.

Farida's description of her step father's religious teachers in ethno-racial, and even geographic, terms reflects the fact that in the context of the post-Soviet Muslim revival, various Muslim countries came to be associated with certain forms of Islam, and one's religious identity with the country where one studied or where one's religious teachers came from. My analysis of Malika's narrative above reveals some stereotypes that are associated with "Arabs." Commenting on the post-Soviet opening of the borders, Emelianova (2005), suggests that "Among the controversial implications of the reintegration of Russian Muslims into the Islamic world has been their wider exposure to transnational forms of Islam, associated mainly with Salafism (Islam of ancestors), or Wahhabism," at the expense of local Muslim traditions (p. 245). Providing a list of specific countries, Emelianova further points out that such exposure happens through rigorous teaching and associated missionary activity.

My fieldwork indicates that average Tatars generally associate Turkey, for instance, with "moderate," more "Tatar-like"<sup>261</sup> Islam, while they associate Saudi Arabia

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<sup>259</sup> A pilgrimage to Mecca that, which takes place in the last month of the year and which is mandatory for all able Muslims at least once in their life time. This word of Arabic origin is becoming widely used by practicing Muslims in both Russian and Tatar. Here, Farida uses the Russian version of the word ("hadzh").

<sup>260</sup> Farida pronounces the word with Arabic accent, but conjugate the word in accordance with the Russian grammar ("iz '**alimov**").

and other Middle Eastern countries with “foreign,” or radical Islam. This could be due to the fact that Tatars and Turks of Turkey share a historical connection grounded, at various points in time, in a common ethno-cultural and linguistic heritage (both speak a Turkic language) and Sunni-Hanafi legal tradition. Both groups originated from Central Asia. However, as my earlier discussion of the closure of Turkish schools throughout Russia (and Tatarstan) illustrates, an average Tatar’s perception of a certain nationality may not be shared by government officials. This ultimately points out the unstable, yet complex, nature of these identities, as well as stereotypes and perceptions that they reflect and generate.

Farida’s description of her stepfather’s religious education further reflects the complexity of the relationship drawn between one’s religious identity and sources of religious knowledge. Farida’s initial reaction that her stepfather was “self-taught” and “did not study anywhere” could indicate that she understood my question as implying a religious educational institution, such as a *medrese*. It may also point to her hesitation to comment on the question because the fact that Farida’s stepfather “gradually switched” from Turkish to Arab teachers could be perceived as “radicalization” of his religious views. This is why—without my asking for it—Farida felt the need to defend her stepfather’s ultimate choice of religious teachers. Furthermore, Farida’s juxtaposing of the two countries reflects the Tatars’ struggles to locate the kind of Islam that they should practice, as well as debates surrounding it: “So, how can we think that the Turks have more knowledge when the source of knowledge, those to whom the knowledge came, were the Arabs” (lines 80-82). In her question, Farida simultaneously enacted two discourses prevalent among the Tatars today: (a) Turkish Islam is more “Tatar”-like and



that is where the Tatars should seek their religious knowledge, and (b) “only” Arabs or “all” Arabs are true Muslims and the ultimate source of knowledge on Islam. On the other hand, similar to Malika, by clarifying that she referred to “*the ‘alim,*” or religiously “knowledgeable” Arabs, not all Arabs, Farida emphasized the (“good”) quality of religious knowledge that her stepfather received. Through describing her stepfather’s religious teachers Farida indirectly commented on the kind of Islam her stepfather practiced.

The generational dimension in Tatars’ debate over which Islamic tradition(s) should define their future identity and the role of religious authority and daily practices in this debate is also illustrated in Farida’s story as she continued her narrative. When, referring to her earlier statement (lines 65-66), I asked her why Muslims were incarcerated in her town in the past, Farida told a story about a conflict that took place between younger and older Muslims. According to Farida, when a younger generation of Muslim men began performing *namaz*, the daily prayer, in accordance with the Shafii (non-Hanafi) *madhhab*, “the old men said: ‘You either recite *namaz* the way we do, or you leave, and we won’t let you into the mosque.’ And the next time they didn’t let them in.”

Such attention to the style of the formal prayer could be explained by the fact that, as I witnessed on multiple occasions during my fieldwork, it is perceived as the easiest, however imprecise, way to determine what kind of Muslim one is. In one particular instance I observed, an older Tatar woman who conducted informal religious education among female university students corrected one of them when she saw the girl perform the prayer the way Farida described it in her narrative, which slightly deviated from the

Hanafi prayer style. The girl came to Kazan to attend a university and learned the formal prayer in her hometown outside Kazan. When the girl unassumingly asked why she was being corrected, the teacher's response was: "We don't do it this way here."

As Farida continued her narrative, she suggested that a younger imam was removed from his position by the older generation because "they didn't like that he did everything in accordance with *Sunnah*; they didn't like that he studied in Medina. They were not satisfied with that; they needed *babaiskii* [Ru./Tat. 'old-Tatar-men-like'] Islam."<sup>262</sup> They did not need the Truth." The Tatar word "*babay*" refers to an old man, grandfather. But in a religious context of the Soviet era, it also referred to an unofficial male Muslim religious authority, a person who possessed some, often limited, religious knowledge. It was usually an older retiree, and a small number of these men are still around today. Similarly to an older generation of Tatar women (represented by Taskira *apa* at the beginning of this chapter), this generation of Muslim Tatar men are advocates of "traditional Tatar Islam" associated with the Hanafi school of law in Sunni Islam.<sup>263</sup>

By using the term "*babaiskii*," Farida signals that at the heart of the conflict between the older and younger generation of Muslims was the nature of Islam that should define the mosque's parishioners' religious identities. In this struggle, the older generation's interpretation of the religious identities of the imam and his supporters was based on the source of his religious knowledge (Medina), the way he recited the formal prayer (Shafi'i *madhhab*) and how he manifested his piety (in accordance with *Sunnah*).

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<sup>262</sup> Farida uses the word "*babaiskii*" an adjective, with the Tatar root "*babai*" ("an old man") and a Russian adjective morpheme "*skii*."

<sup>263</sup> Mukhametshin (2009) also points out to the role of younger imam's foreign-based Islamic education in this generational conflict. He suggests that the younger "imams used to their advantage their educational superiority over unofficial Soviet-era mullahs [Tat. 'Muslim clergy'] who did not have any structured Islamic education and could not argumentatively defend their positions. Their main argument in the debate with their younger counterparts was: 'This was how our ancestors did'." (p. 39).

On the other hand, Farida's assertion that the older men "did not need the Truth" points to the younger generation's perception of "the old-Tatar-men-like" Islam as Soviet-era, and thus ethnic- and custom-based, far from the *Sunnah* and true religious knowledge.

Such perception of religion in generational terms is further supported by my experience in the field. During my visits with Malika throughout the course of the fieldwork, she often expressed her and her husband's frustration over the fact that his parishioners, the majority of whom were Tatars in their late forties and older, continued to practice Islam in their old, "Tatar," way. What Malika and her husband meant was that the older generation's perception of Islam was often shaped by the Soviet-era religious traditions and knowledge.

On one occasion, Malika and I attended an *ash*, a Tatar religious gathering with the purpose of Qur'an recitations and prayers, accompanied by a sit-down meal. The *ash* was hosted by a practicing Tatar woman in her sixties who became observant upon retirement. The hostess had invited about eight other women of the same age and an *abistay*, a Tatar woman in her seventies who was considered the best at Qur'an recitations and a local religious authority of sorts. The gathering began with Qur'an recitations by the *abistay*, followed by Malika's reciting of a few short *surah* (Qur'anic chapters) at the hostess' request. Once the recitations ended and prayers were said, the women exchanged small gifts and small amounts of cash among themselves as *sadakah*, a form of alms giving. Malika quickly excused herself and left the table right before the exchange began. When I later asked her why she did not participate in the exchange, she explained that in Islam *sadakah* was meant for the needy and the poor, which made the ritual a local (Tatar) cultural tradition in her eyes because the women were not needy.

Farida's description of the mosque conflict as a generational one—between “the old men” and “the young men,” “boys”— can be challenged based on the fact that her parents, who are generationally “in between,” supported the younger group. Therefore, it would be wrong to define Tatars' search for the “right” kind of religious identity strictly in generational terms. Rather, in Tatars' varying perceptions of Islam age is a contributing factor. Finally, I argue that, on the one hand, in her story Farida voiced and debunked some common perceptions and stereotypes that are formed on the basis of physical manifestations of piety (especially those that constitute a religious “norm”). On the other hand, however, Farida also drew on these common perceptions (such as one's sources of Islamic knowledge as a true indicator of religious identity) to position her family and her own religious identities as religiously “knowledgeable” (and, therefore, considered outside the “norm”) and thus legitimate. Farida's story, therefore, was a discursive site where, simultaneously, Tatars' struggle over religious identity was reflected and where Farida constituted her family's identity as legitimate, thereby asserting her agency.

### **In Search of Identity in a Piety Story**

The recent Muslim revival expanded the Tatar sovereignty movement's goals that were focused on reviving the Tatar language and obtaining political independence. Today, the Tatars' interest in revitalizing their language and building a sovereign nation is also accompanied by a growing interest in Islam, which is no longer treated as a marker of ethnic identity, but a powerful force in its own right. An increasing number of Tatars perceive Islam—and not the Tatar language or an independent Tatar state—as a

moral imperative for personal change and, therefore, social transformation. As Taskira *apa*'s story demonstrated, this development is particularly evident in the way the sovereignty movement's activists talk about Islam as a defining feature of Tatars' identity.

Present-day Tatars, however, debate not only the extent to which Islam, and not only ethnicity, should define their identities, but also about what kind of Islam should be part of their lives. This debate—among non-Muslims, non-observant Muslim Tatars, as well as practicing Muslim Tatars who do not possess sufficient knowledge for interpreting differences within normative Islam—is often focused on sources of Islamic knowledge as a true indicator of one's religious identity. In addition, physical manifestations of Muslim piety are also treated as reliable markers of what kind of Islam one practices and constitute a religious “norm.”

These debates on the “right” kind of identity have a generational dimension to them. As Taskira *apa*'s narrative illustrated, the older generation of Tatars often conflate ethnic and religious elements of an identity, manifested, for example, in their treatment of the Tatar language use as a religious duty. On the other hand, the younger generation is increasingly interested in religious knowledge and practice that are independent of the Tatar component, demonstrated by Malika's and Farida's hesitance to rely on local Tatar elders for religious knowledge. The women's attempts to go beyond Soviet-era religious knowledge, which is closely tied to Tatar ethnic traditions, are reflective of the Tatars' increasing introspection about Muslim religious knowledge and practices they seek to cultivate. This is despite the fact that practicing Muslims are aware of stereotypical

perceptions formed on the basis of one's sources of religious knowledge and outward manifestations of piety that are perceived to deviate from the accepted religious norm.

I conclude that one specific way Taskira *apa*, Malika, Farida, and other practicing Muslim women I got to know deal with such perceptions is in their piety stories by employing various discursive strategies. Taskira *apa* referred to her rich life experience and religious authority (the Qur'an) to make a case for preservation of the Tatar language as an element of Tatars' identity important to her. Malika presented the sources of her religious knowledge as theologically or morally sound and thus legitimate. All three women, including Farida, acknowledged and deconstructed stereotypes and "norms" associated with certain beliefs or practices, while also drawing on them to make their case. As such, the women's stories served as discursive sites that reflected the Tatars' struggle over religious identities. Ultimately, piety stories were also the sites where the women simultaneously constituted and legitimized their own religious identities and ideas about Islam, thereby exerting their agency.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSIONS

In this dissertation, I analyzed piety stories, a culturally specific mode of communication by practicing Muslim Tatar women in the central Russian republic of Tatarstan. Centered on women's paths to Muslim piety, which is grounded in physical observation of daily religious practices, these stories are an inseparable part of the women's *iman* [Tat./Ar. 'faith'], identity, the local Muslim discursive community, and the Tatars' religious revival. The process of continuously striving to be a pious Muslim woman, which is at the heart of these stories, is also one's continuous quest for identity and meaning and quest to make sense of the world and, ultimately, a difference in it. I see this dissertation as an extension of my own return to Tatarstan for fieldwork after a decade in the U.S. Being immersed in my community of origin set me on an intellectual path to recognizing the personal and social value behind piety stories, listening to them carefully, wrestling to make sense of them, and learning to write about them in such a way that would allow these stories and their tellers to come alive, highlighting the vulnerability but, ultimately, resilience of the human potential. It is the women's ability to *do* things with words—despite the lack of or in the presence of other resources—and thereby to bring about personal and social transformation that this dissertation is about.

My primary goal in this dissertation was to understand what practicing Muslim Tatars women do when they tell or hear a piety story and what rhetorical and social effects story-sharing has on both the narrator and the audience, and, possibly, beyond. On one level, the purpose of my research and analysis was to contribute to our understandings of ways identities are enacted, re-created, performed, and negotiated via

specific (localized) communicative practices (such as piety stories). On another level, I hoped to shed light on what Muslim Tatar women's stories, as social practices, could tell us about the current Muslim revival taking place among Tatars and about the impetus behind choosing Islam as a way of life.

Throughout the dissertation, I demonstrated how women use piety stories to perform their identities, negotiate group memberships, and provide a discursive way for the speaker to practice being a Muslim and for the audience, a blueprint for becoming one. I analyzed how, by creating continuity and coherence in their piety stories, women achieve moral standing and authority that allows them to invite listeners to step onto a similar path—a path to Muslim piety. I showed that women use storytelling as a form of *da'wah*, a Muslim's duty to invite others to Islam. I explained some of the ways women, through the act of storytelling, challenge or embrace certain gender roles, (re)produce their understanding of Islam and, thereby normalize or question certain interpretations of what it means to be a (Muslim) woman. My ultimate goal was to explain that, as communicative means for (re)producing and legitimizing certain, often alternative to secular, ways of being, piety stories serve as sources of agency, and their sharing is an empowering experience that carries the potential for both personal and social transformation.

In this final chapter, I first outline research questions and goals at the heart of this dissertation, and explain my methodological choices of ethnography and discourse analysis, and my theoretical focus on agency. I then describe how my own journey, as a researcher but also a human being, contributed to and ultimately framed this dissertation's questions and conclusions. I proceed with a discussion of theoretical



implications of this dissertation, stressing the need to expand modes of inquiry that question normative critiques of unfamiliar peoples and contexts, and the need to account of researcher's own beliefs and assumptions. Finally, I propose a number of ways this dissertation's research could be capitalized on in order to explore issues that remained outside of the scope of this work.

### **Historical Legacy and Social Context**

My inquiry into Muslim Tatar women's piety stories was an inquiry into identities of women living in a specific place at a specific point in time. These women's stories, desires, and worldviews could be understood only if located within the multiple contexts and complex historical legacies that contributed to these women's identities and stories. Among them are a complicated history of an ethnic and religious minority status within imperial Russia and the Soviet Union; ethnic revival and promises of sovereignty upon the Soviet Union's collapse, combined with painful socio-economic transitions; present-day Russia's attempts to curb its Muslim minorities' ethnic and religious aspirations by centralizing political power in the federal center and forging a state-supported version of Islam. The Tatars' complex historical legacy, present-day status within Russia, and aspirations to be part of the global *Ummah*, necessitated an approach and theoretical frameworks that, while allowing me to focus on the communicative practice of sharing piety stories, would also enable me to position these stories within the larger socio-historical milieu. A methodological approach of in-depth ethnographic research and discourse analysis with attention to historical legacy and insights from Muslim feminist

studies allowed me to focus on piety stories within the larger political and historical context.

### **Language Use**

Locally situated language use and its analysis were central to my inquiry, as both subject and analytical tool, not only because I chose to focus on Muslim Tatar women's discursive practices such as piety stories. The focus on language was necessitated by the fact that language is what makes us human because to have a language is "to be part of a community of people who engage in joint, common activities through the use of a largely, but never completely, shared range of communicative resources [. . .] being part of a tradition sharing a history, and hence access to a collective memory, full of stories, innuendoes, opinions, recipes, and other things that make us human" (Duranti 1997, p. 334).

My discourse analysis of Muslim Tatar women's piety stories approaches discourse as an observable performance (Goffman, 1981) of a transformative experience that takes place in the moment of storytelling (not a verbal account of the "original" conversion event) (Stromberg, 1993). This approach does not take away from the exploration of the significance behind the religious experience itself because "in order to tell the stories of their conversions, believers must talk about aspects of their experience that have profound meanings for them" (Stromberg, 1993, p. 15).

Assuming a performative approach to language (Austin, 1961, 1962), and drawing on conversion narratives (Stromberg 1993) and life stories (Linde, 1993), I conducted discourse analysis to understand what Muslim Tatar women, as social agents,

do when they share their stories. I discovered that Muslim Tatar women agentively use piety stories to negotiate their identities, gain group membership, re-affirm their commitment to Islam, legitimize their visions of it, and provide the audience with a sample path to Muslim piety, which they regard as a means to personal and social transformation. The concept of agency, therefore, as an ability to act, to make choices, and thereby, impact the environment (Giddens 1984) was central to this dissertation.

### **Muslim Feminist Understanding of Agency**

While in my analysis, I drew on the concept of agency that underscores one's ability to act and therefore effect change, I also had to account for ways agency takes alternative forms within a specific context (Ortner 2006). In the case of practicing Muslim Tatar women whose understanding of Muslim piety is rooted in the correct performance of physical observances (the five daily prayers, the veil, the diet), such alternative understanding of agency implies one's submission to and enactment of the highly prescribed religious norms (Mahmood 2005). It is the synthesis of (a) an ethnographic approach, (b) discourse analysis situated within the local socio-historic realities, and (c) the two notions of agency that informed my analysis and enabled me to explore the ways practicing Muslim Tatar women use piety stories creatively, strategically, and agentively, as a venue for personal and social transformation.

### **The Researcher's Journey**

Marranci (2008) argues that an inquiry into Muslim lives and identities should go beyond focusing on Islam as a single defining factor in determining all facets of

Muslims' identities and lives. Instead, he proposes to focus ethnographically on "observing the dynamics of Muslim lives expressed through their ideological and rhetorical understanding of their surrounding (social, natural, virtual) environment" (Marranci: Kindle Locations 1410-1411).<sup>264</sup>

It was Muslim Tatar women's—including my own mother's—interest in and turn to Islam that had originally set me on a journey to learning more about these women's identities and stories. The driving question of my research project, fueled by my personal curiosity, was to find out why these women chose Islam as a way of life despite potential difficulties associated with living as a practicing Muslim in a secular, increasingly nationalist, Russian state. This was also the very first question that many people, academics and non-academics alike, have asked me about my dissertation research. While this, from one perspective, was a reasonable question to ask, its underlining assumption was that there was something about Islam that made one's interest in it "not normal" and in need of explanation.

As I began my work in the field, I realized that it was a common practice among non-practicing Muslim Tatars and non-Tatars alike to attribute practicing Tatar women's interest in Islam to a narrow choice of reasons that were routinely applied to these women's diverse experiences. These assumed explanations included a traumatic event in life (personal drama), a romantic interest in a Muslim man, or a nod to fashion (as a collective trend to observe Islam and women's interest in Muslim fashion). Yet, none of the women I met and spoke with in the course of my research directly and decisively attributed their turn to Muslim piety to any of these three phenomena. Moreover, when

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<sup>264</sup> Marranci (2008) clarifies that by "ideological" he means "as a set of beliefs structuring a personal discourse" (Kindle Location 1452).

Muslim Tatar women solicited their stories, they did not ask one another about what made them turn to Islam. Rather, the question that they used to solicit one another's stories—"How did you come to Islam?"—implied a journey, not a single cause. Often times, the cause was known, shared, and accepted as a culturally meaningful given. It was *Allah tägalä* [Tat. 'God, the Exalted'] who was the reason behind a woman's *iman* [Tat. 'faith'], who set her onto the road to piety. However, each woman's journey was unique and deeply personal and thus worth sharing.

These observations—and women's stories—made me question my own assumptions about studying Muslim women and trying to find causes behind their turn to piety. They ultimately made me expand the framework of my inquiry and analysis to shift the focus from causes to meaning. Instead of probing why Muslim Tatar women turn to Islam, I began asking what piety stories reveal about what it means to be a practicing Muslim woman living in Russia today. I wanted to know what it meant to grow up in a practicing Muslim family, or to become a practicing Muslim woman early in life. Or what does it mean to step onto the road to piety in the middle of one's life, against the local cultural expectations? I hoped to understand what it meant to be an older practicing Muslim Tatar woman, such as my mother, who lived most of her life during the Soviet era and became observant later in life.

In some ways, my own mother's path to Muslim piety and the way she goes about her life as a practicing Muslim woman speaks to the complexities of being a practicing Muslim woman her age, living in the present-day secular Russian state. Today, I observe her being very strict about performing the five-daily prayers on time, fasting during Ramadan, eating only *halal* [Tat./Ar. 'permissible under Islamic normative law'] food,

dressing modestly, and asking forgiveness for sins at the end of the day after the night prayer. At the same time, she is not dogmatic in her practice. On occasion, I also observe her shake hands with men whom she has met for the first time, who extended their hand to her in an act of greeting, and whom she deemed unaware of her Muslim identity and Muslim practices. I sometimes hear her question out loud certain practices (normative Muslim or local customary, which she treats as Muslim) that she finds unreasonable or hard to understand for a person with limited theological knowledge, such as the possibility of polygyny (predicated upon certain conditions), or encouragement (based on the Prophet Muhammad's example) to recite the entire Qur'an in the course of the holy month of Ramadan. But I would also argue that my mother's understanding and practice of Muslim piety ultimately symbolize the resilience and complexity of human nature and human experience that can never be fully explained and understood by simple theories of cause and effect or general sociological patterns. This dissertation is my earnest attempt to add to the body of knowledge on what it means to be a practicing Muslim Tatar woman living in present-day Russia, which can contribute to our understanding of what it means to be a human being.

### **Theoretical Implications of Research**

While this dissertation highlights the locally-informed ways Muslim Tatar women use piety stories, I would like to suggest that the dissertation's conclusions have relevance beyond the immediate context at hand. In particular, I hope that my research will contribute, to borrow Mahmood's (2005) words, to the "expansion of the normative understanding of critique" (p. 36) when it comes to contexts that we find less "familiar."

Such an expansion is predicated on “a mode of encountering the Other which does not assume that in the process of culturally translating other lifeworlds one’s own certainty about how the world should proceed can remain stable” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 199).

Specifically, in relation to critiques of people and movements that do not always share the liberal/progressivist notions of individual freedom, resistance, power, and agency, the expansion of the normative understanding of critiques is necessary if we are to understand why certain people embrace and operate on ideas, discourses, and practices that we, as Western academics, might find repugnant. Such a mode of inquiry requires more than scientific knowledge, training, and commitment. It requires “the virtue of humility: a sense that one does not always know *what* one opposes and that a political vision at times has to admit its own finitude in order to even comprehend what it has sought to oppose (Mahmood, 2005, p. 199). I can only hope that my analysis of practicing Muslim Tatar women’s piety stories demonstrates such humility on some level and to some extent. I also hope that this dissertation encourages other scholars to consider their own assumptions and beliefs when embarking on a research project, because no scholar can be neutral and work entirely outside their own cultural frameworks.

### **Looking Forward: Implications for Future Research**

There are, of course, questions that I was not able to address, and that await to be answered. While some of the stories I analyzed in this dissertation briefly touch on this subject, it would be productive to explore further the interplay among various kinds of Muslim authorities (and discursive strategies that they employ) that impact Muslim Tatar women, such as (a) official local Muslim clergy (exclusively male), (b) *abıstaylar* [Tat.

‘female figures of religious authority’] who give informal lessons at home and local mosques, (c) religious institutions (such as *medrese*) and their teachers, (d) religious media (books, websites, TV), and (e) fellow practicing women. A study on identity and discourse that does not focus on Muslim Tatar women exclusively, but includes men could further highlight the role of gender in shaping discursive strategies as ways of doing.<sup>265</sup> Finally, a longitudinal study, which would investigate the trajectories of Muslim Tatar women’s lives and pieties vis-à-vis discursive practices (such as piety stories) over time, would provide a better understanding of specific modes of Muslim piety, discourse, agency, and their social significance overtime.

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<sup>265</sup> Marranci (2008) points out the need to conduct studies that include Muslim men and sexual minorities.



## APPENDIX A

### SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS<sup>266</sup>

#### *Questions related to choosing a Muslim way of life*

1. How long have you been practicing Islam?
2. Tell me about your path to Islam
3. Was your family (parents, siblings, grandparents) religious?
4. Do you remember what was the prevalent attitude toward religion, Islam in particular, in society when you started practicing? Has it changed?
5. What was the reaction of your family and friends when you started observing Islam, for example, when you started wearing your headscarf?
6. Did you feel a need for support and where did you find it?
7. What were your sources of knowledge about Islam when you started observing it? What are they today?

#### *Questions related to Islamic living*

8. Give specific examples of how your life has changed since you started practicing Islam (such as daily routine, relations with family and friends, work situation, hobbies/interests).
9. Can you give me examples of what “being a Muslim” means to you?
10. What rituals do you perform daily?
11. Are there other ways in which you practice your faith daily?
12. From your experience, has it become easier to live Islamic life in Tatarstan, compared to ten years ago?
13. Are there any challenges that you personally (or Muslim women you know) face in their everyday life today? For example, do you feel comfortable wearing your headscarf, praying in public, or asking for halal food?
14. Are you able to realize your educational or career goals?
15. How do you perceive the role of a woman in a society?
16. How do you see the future of Russia and Tatarstan in the next five years?
17. What kind of a society would you like to live in or wish for your children to live in?

#### *Questions related to ethnic (Tatar) vs. religious (Muslim) identity*

18. Do you consider all ethnic Tatars Muslims?
19. Is it as important for you to know your ethnic heritage (Tatar language, culture) as to know Islam?
20. Do you find more in common with an ethnic non-practicing Tatar or with a practicing Muslim who is not Tatar?
21. What are your criteria for choosing a future spouse (for yourself or your children)?

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<sup>266</sup> The original set of my interview questions was built around Glock and Starks's (1966) five dimensions of religiosity: belief, ritual, experience, knowledge, and consequences (as cited in Burwell, R. (1999). Dimensions of religious commitment. In Hill & Hood (Eds.) *Measures of Religiosity*, (pp. 279-281). Birmingham: Religious Education Press). I further revised those questions based on the feedback I received during my research.

*Questions related to religious identity*

22. Do you have any knowledge of foreign languages?
23. Have you considered/started/considering studying Turkish or Arabic? For what purposes?
24. (Younger person): Have you ever considered (or would you consider) studying outside Russia? Where and why?
25. Older person: would you consider letting your children or grandchildren study outside Russia? Where and why?
26. Have you had any contact with Tatar diasporic or Muslim communities abroad? If so, can you tell me more about that experience (how it was initiated, how long it lasted, how it impacted your perception about living in Tatartsan)?
27. Is there anything else you would like to add or share with me?

## APPENDIX B

### TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

<b>Bold face</b>	Arabic words or recent Arabic borrowings that are only making their way into both Russian and Tatar. <sup>267</sup>
<b><u>Bold underlined italics</u></b>	Tatar words or older Persian/Arabic borrowings that have become an integral part of the Tatar language.
<i>Italics</i>	Russian words or morphemes in Tatar/Arabic words
[Ar. faith]	English translation of Arabic, Tatar, or Russian words
((softer voice))	description of non-verbal behavior or comment on transcript
()	an unsure transcription
“the day has come”	direct speech
‘I came to Islam’	direct speech within someone else’s direct speech
[...]	omission of some part of the interview data that was deemed less relevant to the subject matter at hand
[him]	word(s) in brackets were not present in the original interview, but had to be inserted for the translation to make sense
[	overlapping utterance
=	latching of utterances
...	pause in speech
a:::nd	lengthening of the sound
<u>boys</u>	speaker’s emphasis
op- opened	broken off word

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<sup>267</sup> I used standard English spellings for common Arabic words found in English-language dictionaries (such as “hijab” or “Muhammad”).

## APPENDIX C

### TRANSLITERATION CONVENTIONS

#### Tatar

Presently, no unified transliteration system exists for modern-day Tatar. Therefore, in this dissertation I utilized Tatar transliteration conventions offered by Suzanne Wertheim (2003a, p. 355), which, I believe reflects the specificity of the Tatar language phonic system well.

Transliteration	Cyrillic	Transliteration	Cyrillic
a	а	l	л
ä	ә	m	м
b	б	n	н
ch	ч	ng	ң
d	д	o	о
e	е	ö	ө
f	ф	p	п
g	г	r	р
g''	гъ	s	с
h	һ	sh	ш
i	и	t	т
ia	я	u	у
iu	ю	ü	ү
ï	ы	v	в
j	ж	w	в
k	к	y	й
k''	къ	z	з
kh	х	' (soft sign)	ь

## Russian

I adapted (with slight modifications) the Library of Congress' transliteration system, which can be accessed at <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsd/romanization/russian.pdf>

Transliteration	Cyrillic	Transliteration	Cyrillic
a	а	o	о
b	б	p	п
ch	ч	r	р
d	д	s	с
e	е / ё / э	sh	ш
f	ф	shch	щ
g	г	t	т
i	и / й	ts	ц
ia	я	u	у
iu	ю	v	в
k	к	y	ы
kh	х	z	з
l	л	zh	ж
m	м	' (soft sign)	ь
n	н	" (hard sign)	ъ

## APPENDIX D

### GLOSSARY OF TERMS<sup>268</sup>

*adab* (Ar.) / *ädäb* (Tat.) – manners, conduct, behavior in accordance with prescribed Muslim etiquette.

*abïstay* (pl. *abïstaylar*) (Tat.) – a Tatar female religious authority, a woman who can recite the Qur'an and is knowledgeable about the basic tenants/rituals of Islam; a wife of an imam (male religious authority).

*Alhamdulillah* or *Al-hamdu li'Llah* (Ar.) – literally, “praise be to God”; in daily speech used as “Thank God!”

*Allah* (Ar/Tat.) – God; Lord

*Allah birsa* (Tat.) – “God willing”

*Allah subhana wa ta'ala* (Ar.) / *Allah subhana wa tägalä* (Tat.) – “God, May He be Glorified and Exalted”; the phrase is used to refer to God in a pious manner; given spelling reflects the way the phrases are pronounced among Tatars. “*Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala*” is considered a more correct pronunciation.

*Allah tägalä* / *Allahï tägalä* (Tat.) / *Allah ta'ala* (Ar.) – a short version of “*Allah subhanu wa ta'ala*”; can be translated as “God, the Exalted”

*Amin!* (Tat.) – ‘Amen!’

*apa* (Tat.) – aunt; a respectful form of address to a woman who is older than the addressee

*Assalyamu aleikum* (Ar.) – literally, “May peace be upon you,” a greeting used by Muslims to greet one another; pronunciation and transliteration of the phrase differs from country to country.

*ash* (*ashlar* – pl.) (Tat.) – a Tatar tradition of a religious gathering (usually in honor of an important event) at a dinner table with the purpose of reciting of the Qur'an, saying prayers, socializing, and enjoying the meal.

*Astaghfirullah* (Ar.) – literally, “I seek forgiveness from God”; in daily life, the phrase is used by Muslims to express their wish to abstain from doing something wrong or to ask forgiveness for an improper action or feeling. A Muslim is also encouraged to recite the phrase after every ritual prayer.

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<sup>268</sup> In the process of compiling this glossary, I consulted with the following sources: Esposito (2003), Safiullina (2005), Peshkova (2006).

*‘alim* (Ar.) – knowledgeable, educated, especially in relation to Islam

*‘awrat* (Ar.) – literally, “nakedness,” “shame.” Parts of the human body that should be covered from the eyes of others. The term does not refer to parts of the human body that must be covered by everyone at all times. What constitutes *‘awrat* is situational and also depends on the *madhhab* [Ar. ‘Muslim school of law’].

*äbi* (*äbilär - pl.*) (Tat.) – grandmother, older woman

*äkhliak* (Tat.) – Muslim ethics; a set of norms of behavior considered appropriate for a Muslim

*baba* (Ru.) – woman (conversational)

*babay* (Tat.) – old man, grandfather

*cherti* (Ru.) – demons

*dagvat* (Ru.) / *däg’vat* (Tat.) / *da’wah/dawah/dawa* (Ar.) – an invitation or call to Islam

*da’iya / da’iyah* (Ar.) – the one who undertakes *dagvat/da’wah*

*da’wah/dawah/dawa* (Ar.) – an invitation or call to Islam

*doga* (Tat.) – a non-ritual prayer; a request, a form of direct address to God.

*Evroislam* (Ru.) – Euroislam; an interpretation of Islam advanced by the Tatar historian Rafael Khakimov

*farz* (Tat.) / *fardh* (Ar.) – mandatory religious duty, binding on every able Muslim, such as five daily prayers, fast during Ramadan, etc.

*glasnost* (Ru.) – openness

*hadith* (*ahadith - pl.*) (Ar.) / *hädis* (Tat.) / *hadis* (Ru.) – an account of exemplary sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, or his approval of certain behavior, put together in collections in accordance with certain denominations within Islam and studied by Muslims in addition to the Qur’an itself.

*hajj* (Ar.) – a pilgrimage to Mecca that, which takes place in the last month of the year and which is mandatory for all able Muslims at least once in their life time.

*halal* (Ar./Tat.) – that which is permissible under Islamic law

*Hanafi* (Ar.) – one of the four schools of law in Sunni Islam

*haram* (Ar./Tat.) – that which is forbidden under Islamic law (for example, alcohol)

*hijab* (Ar.) – a general term for traditional Muslim women’s covering of the body, head, and sometimes face, or variations thereof, also known as “veil.” The original Arabic word refers to a physical curtain or screen, or, metaphorically to something that protects, or separates in two parts.

*hukm* (Ar.) – Islamic ruling

*iftar* (Tat.) / *iftaar* (Ar.) – a fast-breaking dinner during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

*iman* (Tat./Ar.) – faith

*Imam* (Tat./Ar.) – literally, the person who stands in front, a role model; prayer leader. In Tatarstan: Muslim clergy who serves as a designated religious authority in a mosque. The term is applied to a younger generation of Muslim clergy who are believed to be more competent and educated than an older generation of *mullahs*.

*Insha’Allah* (Ar.) – literally, “God willing.” The phrase is used by Muslims with respect to future events.

*isem kushu* (Tat.) – a Tatar term for the Muslim name-giving ceremony performed shortly after a child’s birth.

“*Islam traditsii*” (Ru.) – Islam of tradition

*Jadids* (Tat.) / (Ar.) – Muslim modernist reformists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Russian Empire and Central Asia

*Jadidism* (Tat.) – Muslim modernist reformist movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Russian Empire and Central Asia

*jahilliyah* (Ar.) – literally, “ignorance,” “not-knowing,” “unaware.” Metaphorically and in stories the word is used to refer to the time of “not-knowing,” the pre-Islamic period in the history of Arabia, before the revelation of the Qur’an.

*kaziy* (Tat.) – Muslim judge.

*khanim* (*khanimnar* – pl.) (Tat.) – lady, madam; a formal form of address to a woman.

*Khater Kone* (Tat.) – “Memory Day”; a day observed by Tatars on the second Sunday in October to commemorate the fall of Kazan in 1552.

*khäer* (Tat.) – alms



*khäzrät* (Tat./Ar.) – literally “your honor”/ “your majesty”; in Tatarstan used as a polite and respectful way to address a Muslim clergy or someone whose activity directly relates to Islam (for example, a head of a madrasah or Islamic university).

*khutba* (Ar.) / *khötbä* (Tat.) / *khutba* (Ru.) – weekly sermon, message; mosque sermon before the collective Friday prayer. Tatars (particularly the older generation) also use the Tatar synonym “*vägaz*’.”

*küybla* (Tat.) / *qibla* (Ar.) / *kibla* (Ru.) – the direction of Muslim ritual prayer

*kız* (*kızlar* – pl.) (Tat.) – girl, young woman

*kizim* (Tat.) – “my daughter”; “my girl”; a common way to address one’s daughter or a friendly way to address a girl

*korenizatsiia* (Ru.) – indigenization

*Korban bäyräm* (Tat.) / *Eid-ul-Adha* (Ar.) – a Muslim holiday of the sacrifice that celebrates Abraham’s obedience to God

*krai* (Ru.) – region

*kumgan* (Tat.) – pitcher for ritual ablution.

*La ilaha illa’Llah, Muhammadur rasulu l-Lah* (Ar.) – the words of the *Shahadah*, the declaration of faith in Islam, which translate as “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger.”

*madhhab* (Ar.) / *māzhāb* (Tat.) – one of four schools of law in Sunni Islam (Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, Shafi’i)

*mähällä* (Tat.) – a local Muslim community usually defined by an association with the neighborhood mosque.

*Masha’Allah!* (Ar.) – literally “God has willed it”; used to express praise to Allah and appreciation for an event or person.

*medrese* (Ru.) / *mādräsä* (Tat.) / *madrasah* (Ar.) – the original Arabic word refers to any place of learning, religious or secular; in the Tatar context: Islamic secondary school, a place of secondary and higher Islamic education.

*mudjahid* (*mudjahideen* – pl.) (Ar.) / *modzhakhed* (*modzhakhedy* – pl.) (Ru.) – the original Arabic word refers to the one who struggles on the path to Allah. The present-day Russian calque of the Arabic word is most likely associated with the Soviet military campaign against the Afghan opposition fighters. Thus, a present-day Russian calque has a negative, derogatory connotation and refers to a Muslim militant, terrorist, or someone who is believed to have radical views in Islam.

*mufti* (Ru.) – an official Muslim religious leader (often endorsed by the state and acting in a professional capacity)

*mullah* (Tat./Ar.) – Muslim clergy, figure of authority (in present-day Tatarstan mostly applied to an older generation of Muslim clergy (60 and up) whose religious education was limited due to the Soviet era’s policy of atheism, which contributed to the development of vernacular forms of Islam, informed by Tatar ethnic traditions).

*nadan* (Tat.) – uneducated, illiterate, ignorant

*namaz* (Tat.) – Muslim ritual prayer performed five times a day

*namazlyk* (Tat.) – prayer rug to be used for performing the Muslim ritual prayer, in order to ensure that the surface where the prayer is being performed is clean.

*nikakh* (Tat.) / *nikah* (Ar.) – Muslim marriage ceremony; solemnization of marriage

*nikakhlar ütkärü bergä* (Tat.) – performing Muslim marriages ceremonies jointly

*ostaz* (Tat.) / *ustath* (Ar.) / *ustaz* (Ru.) – male teacher, mentor

*ostaza* (Tat.) / *ustatha* (Ar.) / *ustaza* (Ru.) – female teacher, mentor

*perestroika* (Ru.) – restructuring

*Ploshchad’ Svobody* (Ru.) – “Freedom Square,” the name of one of Kazan’s squares

*prichitanie* (Ru.) – loud weeping during a funeral, customary among ethnic Russian women

*rakagat* (Ru.) / *räkägat* (Tat.) / *raka’ah* (Ar.) – unit of the Muslim ritual prayer

*Ramazan* (Tat.) / *Ramadan* (Ar.) – the holy month of fasting; the month of the Muslim lunar calendar.

*qadar* (Ar.) / *kader* (Tat.) – divine destiny

*Qur'an ash* (*Qur'an ashlar – pl.*) (Tat.) – religious gathering with the purpose of reciting the Qur'an, usually accompanied by a meal.

*sabir* (Tat.) / *sobr* (Ar.) – patience, a quality encouraged in a Muslim

*savab* (Tat.) – an act of good deed; an act of Muslim piety to be rewarded by God; God's reward for good deeds.

*shahadah* (Ar.) – declaration of faith in Islam.

*shahid* (Tat.) / *shaheed* (Ar.) – the original Arabic word refers to honor a Muslim who died defending their faith, country, or family. The meaning is not limited to acts of fighting in the military sense, as a woman who dies during childbirth, for example, can also be referred to as “*shaheed*.”

*shahkidka* (Ru. female) – the Russian version of the word “*shaheed*” usually refers to Muslim female suicide bombers or women who are believed to hold radical Muslim views.

*shaitan* (Ar.) / *shäytan* (Tat.) – satan

*Shari'ah* (Ar.) – Islamic normative law, expressed in the Qur'an and *Sunnah*

*Shia* / *Shi'ah Islam* (Ar.) – the second largest denomination of Islam (after Sunni)

*Subhan Allah* (Ar.) – literally, “Praise be to God.” The phrase is used in the ritual of *tasbih* (verbal glorification of God through a sequence of repeated phrases), as well as in daily life to express an admiration for something good.

*Sunnah* (Ar.) – normative conduct based on the Prophet Muhammad's example.

*Sunni (Islam)* (Ar.) – the largest denomination of Islam

*surah* (Ar.) – one of 114 chapters of the Qur'an.

*taharät* (Tat.) – a ritual of ablution

*tajwid* (Ar.) – rules of Qur'anic recitation.

*talimsizlik* (Tat.) – recklessness, carelessness

*tari iarmasi* (Tat.) – millet porridge

*tasbih* (Ar.) – verbal glorification of God through a sequence of repeated phrases

*Tawakal Allahu* (Ar.) – “Trust God”

*Tatarskii Obshchestvennyi Tsentr* (Ru.) – “The Tatar Public Center,” the name of a Tatar nationalist organization founded in 1988.

*tuneiadstvo* (Ru.) – literally translated from Russian as “idleness”; in the Soviet context, refers to one’s failure to work and thus build one’s moral character and contribute to the common good of the Soviet people.

*ummah* (Ar.) – Muslim religious community around the globe, united by the faith.

*Uraza bäyräm* (Tat.) / *Eid-ul-Fitr* (Ar.) – a Muslim holiday that marks the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

*ustaz* (Ar./Ru.) / *ostaz* (Tat.) – male teacher

*ustaza* (Ar.) – female teacher

*vasiät* (Tat.) – covenant

*Wa aleikum assalyam* (Ar.) – “upon you, too”; a response to the greeting “*Assalyamu aleikum*” used among Muslims; pronunciation and transliteration of the phrase differs from country to country.

*Yasin* (Tat.) / *Ya’sin* (Ar.) – the 36<sup>th</sup> *surah* of the Qur’an, which is believed to alleviate the process of dying and is recited before one’s death.

## APPENDIX E

### MAPS

**Map of Tatarstan's location within Russia**



<http://www.onislam.net/english/oimedia/onislaamen/images/Politics/2013/02/RussiaMap-Tatarstan.gif>

## Map of Autonomous Areas of the Russian Federation

Autonomous Areas in Russia



[http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/commonwealth/russia\\_auton96.jpg](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/commonwealth/russia_auton96.jpg)

**APPENDIX F**  
**PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE FIELDSITE<sup>269</sup>**



The Kol-Sharif mosque: opened in the territory of the Kazan Kremlin in 2005



The Suleiman mosque: first opened in a working-class suburb of Kazan in 1994 (the pictured building opened in 2004)

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<sup>269</sup> All photographs were taken by the author during fieldwork.





A mosque under construction in the town of Zelenodolsk (just west of Kazan)



The Nurulla mosque: opened in Kazan in 1845



Prayer area in one of Kazan's new mosques





Men listen to a Friday sermon at the Kol-Sharif mosque



Young couple observes the name-giving ceremony of their infant, performed by an imam at the Kol-Sharif mosque





An informal mosque lesson at the Nurulla mosque



Class session at the Mukhammadiia *medrese*





Practicing Muslim Tatar women at an *ash* in one of Kazan's mosques (two older women in the center of the top row and the ones sitting down feature elements of traditional formal Tatar dress; two younger women on either side of the top row have their scarves tied "the Arab way"; the girl on the right tied her scarf temporarily for the event, showing hair)



Older (center) and younger (off center, to the right) practicing Muslim Tatar women leaving the Kol-Shārif mosque

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